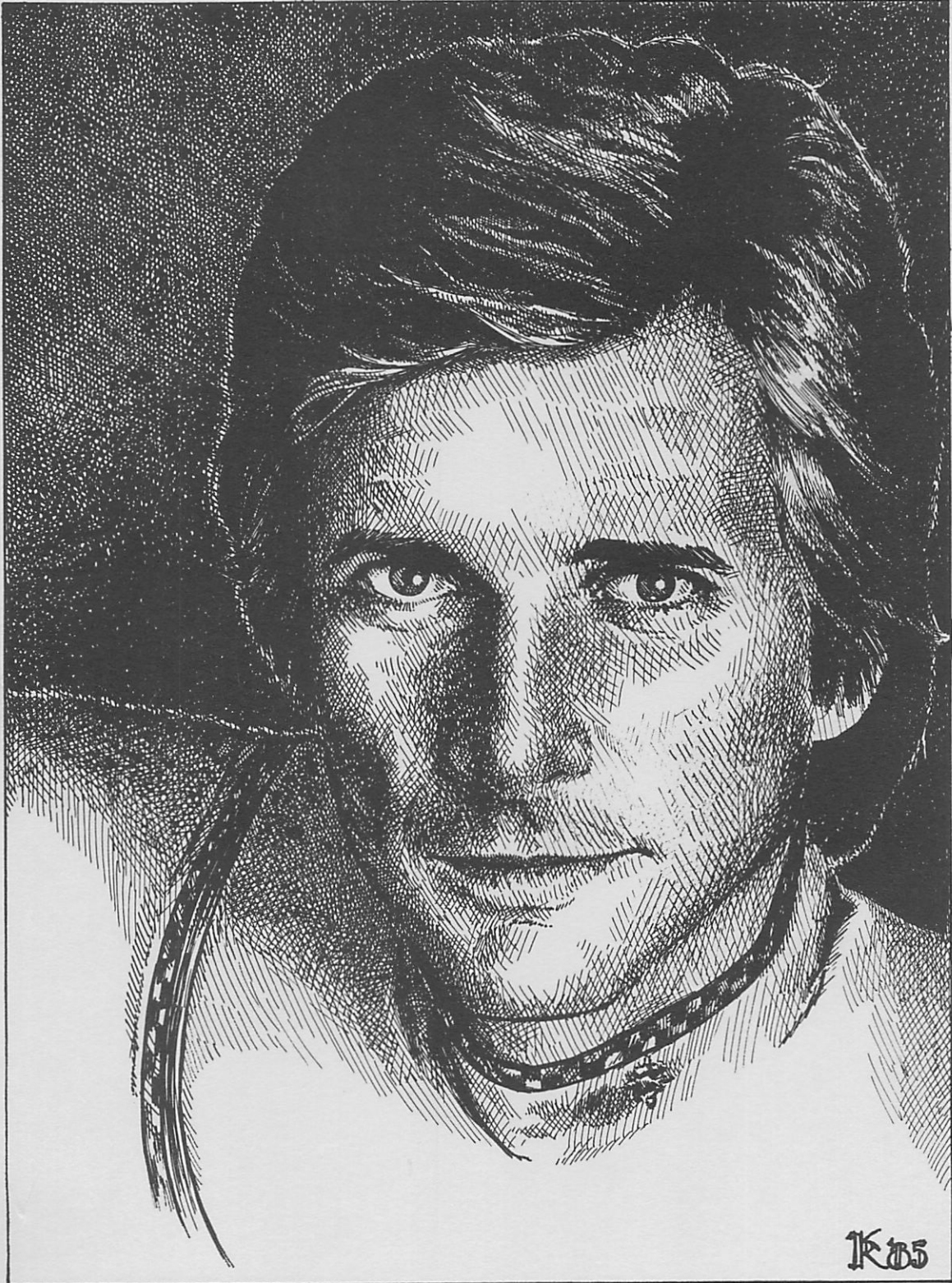


WARRIORS' LUCK



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A Novel By

LINDA RUTH PFONNER

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PART I

Starbuck fidgeted in the close confines of his cockpit. He knew Apollo was out there somewhere to his left, but his friend was far out of visual range. And, somehow, a blip on a scanner just wasn't the same. Talking over a com line didn't carry the same elements as a bull session over ambrosia in the GALACTICA's Officers' Club.

Ambrosia, and a good cigar... Starbuck sighed, and shook his head regretfully. No one had ever figured out a battle-secure way of venting either a helmet or a cockpit to permit smoking in flight. The Lords know, I've tried...! That was one of the major drawbacks to long patrols. Yeah, that, and being stuck in a cockpit for a section, in a pressure suit, without real food, and on rationed and recycled water. Tasteless stuff. But it's better than nothing...

Nothing to do for five more centars... Then he could look forward to ten centars when he was supposed to be asleep. He wondered if Apollo were sleeping, but never even considered calling to find out. It was hard enough to get to sleep in a Viper, and once asleep, no one appreciated being awakened unnecessarily. It was usually impossible to get back to sleep.

He flipped his on-board computer to DISPLAY mode and punched in "GET WRDGMS." The puzzle thus presented was all too familiar -- the ship's tiny computer had a very small surplus memory. He hit the SCROLL button, and the computer obediently rolled through all the available material. He knew it by heart. He'd forgotten to get a new entertainment chip; now, he was stuck six lights from the GALACTICA, with nothing to do but stare at the stars and think.

He liked looking at the stars. It relaxed him, made all human problems seem small. What did it matter to that bright yellow star over there if he were sorely beset by two women, or by twenty Cylons? If he returned to the GALACTICA, or if he were killed out here? Or even if he lived at all? It tended to bring his problems into perspective. Sometimes, he wondered if he didn't owe his sanity to these periodic trips into the Void.

That star looks a lot like Caprica's sun... He swung his Viper around in a wide arc and flew through the biosphere of the familiar-looking star, extending his ship's sensors and programming them for a habitable planet.

Sure enough, right where it should be, there was a blue-and-white globe. He dove into the atmosphere for a closer look, and gasped in amazement.

"Apollo! Wake up!"

There was a moment's silence, then a sleepy growl. "What do you want, Starbuck?"

"Apollo, what did Michael call that planet they settled on?" Starbuck grinned, imagining his friend's reaction. He wasn't disappointed.

"You woke me up in the middle of my sleep period to ask me that!" Apollo fairly yelled.

"My, my, Apollo. Temper, temper!"

"Starbuck...!" The voice promised mayhem.

But before Apollo could say anything he would definitely regret later, Starbuck continued. "I've just spotted a planet so much like it, we should name it Junior."

"Really?" Apollo was definitely under-enthused.

"Yep. Right down to the blasted city."

"Oh?" Now, Apollo was interested. "Michael's city wasn't blasted; it was just abandoned." Then the full realization of what Starbuck was doing struck him.

"Starbuck! You know regulations prohibit atmospheric manoeuvres without superstratospheric support on long patrols!"

The Lieutenant grinned again. It had certainly taken the Captain long enough to realize he couldn't see such detail from space. And he was sure Apollo was the only Warrior in the entire Fleet who could have said that without tripping over his tongue or bursting into laughter.

"But you're ten centons away, and I didn't want to wake you unnecessarily," he responded innocently.

"But..." Apollo gave up. "I'll be right there."

Starbuck heard the roar of his friend's turbos, and the Captain joined him in considerably less than ten centons. They flew a synchronous ball-of-string orbit over the entire planet, searching for some sign that it was still inhabited. But there were no obvious indications.

"Well, there may be scattered survivors left, but there's nothing remotely resembling a mechanized culture left here." Apollo's tone betrayed his disappointment.

"So let's land and take a closer look," Starbuck suggested.

The Captain shook his head. "Come on, Starbuck. You know we aren't equipped to check this place out properly." His Viper suddenly shot spaceward, and the Lieutenant reluctantly followed him.

"I suppose so," Starbuck admitted with a sigh.

Two Vipers streaked toward home.

* * * * *

Three days later, six Vipers swirled down through the pale lavender sky of the planet Starbuck had found. The patrol had strict orders to spend no more than one day planetside. There'd been some grumbling about this, but Adama had pointed out that, since there was only one city -- and that one blasted -- no matter how nice it felt, they were not to enjoy the breezes and grasses for more than thirty centars.

"Oh, this is beautiful!" Athena exclaimed. They hadn't even broken atmosphere yet, but she was exulting in the rare freedom of a Viper, in comparison to the shuttles she usually flew.

The other pilots grinned, Vi with more understanding than the rest. She, too, was not primarily a Viper pilot; she spent most of her time assisting in Engineering, or flying shuttles. Vipers were three orders of magnitude more manoeuvrable and faster than shuttles, and Athena and Vi

revelled in it.

Apollo was not pleased. It didn't make exploration any easier to have a detachment of only six, but to have three women along! And especially this trio -- Sheba was experienced, but Athena and Vi only flew Vipers occasionally, and had been on landing expeditions even less often.

And, to cap it all, the possibilities for emotional fireworks were tremendous, since Starbuck and Boomer completed the sextet.

Boomer and Vi had been seeing each other almost exclusively since Kobol. And Starbuck and Athena were still fond of one another -- although Apollo suspected deeper feelings on his sister's part -- and lately, Starbuck had been seeing even more of Cassiopeia...

He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he hardly noticed when they entered the target planet's system. Starbuck had to call him to rouse him from his reverie.

"Apollo, we're here."

"Huh? Oh. Six point survey sweep, five thousand kilometres out, spiralling to one."

"Here we go."

The six Vipers took up their positions, each of them one-sixth of the way along a solo ship's ball-of-string orbit. This way, one Viper or another would cover the entire globe, while duplicating no effort and taking the least amount of time.

"There it is!" Sheba called. "Just home in on me. Look for a spaceport first."

"A spaceport?"

"Right, Apollo, you know -- a parking lot a kilometre square. You remember, it was just north of the city."

"All I saw was a lake," he admitted.

"I suppose that's a crash target, as well as for fire-fighting," Boomer contributed.

"Yikes! That's not all!" Sheba yelled. "It's military! I'm being fired on!"

"Run!"

"We're coming...!"

Sheba found the instant responses of her fellow Warriors very welcome as she dodged a laser blast. "It's a ground-based cannon," she reported. "I think it's being computer-controlled. Kobol, that was close!"

"Sheba, break atmosphere!" Apollo ordered. "We'll meet you in space!"

"Can't. I just...hit..." Static began to break up her signal, and Apollo pushed his Viper to the highest velocity either he or the tough little fighter could take. "Lost...engine... Heading in... See you..."

"Sheba!"

There was no reply.

"I see it!" Starbuck had been right behind the downed pilot.

"Any sign of Sheba?" The Captain's voice was flat.

"No," his friend told him reluctantly. "Just the port and the lake. And the cannon!" The last word was yelped, as a bolt from that cannon clipped his Viper and sent it spinning.

Boomer, arriving only microns later, gasped in amazement as Starbuck changed his helpless plunge into a falling-leaf dive, swooping around the base of the guns and flying lower than they could be depressed. The damaged Viper loosed two laser bursts of its own, and the emplacement went up in a most satisfactory display of pyrotechnics.

"Attaway, Starbuck!"

Boomer followed his friend in, landing by the lake. Starbuck vaulted out of his cockpit and ran to the water's edge. He had taken a sensor scan of the lake before he landed, and knew Sheba's Viper had hit the crash target. She was lying under several fathoms of water in the centre of the lake.

"Sheba!" he called over his helmet communicator. "Sheba! You receiving?"

"Yes," came a disgusted voice. "The com's about all I have left. This Viper's a total loss."

He sighed in relief. He would have missed her -- and he'd really dreaded the thought of Apollo's grief.

"Well, lady, that's pretty decent flying. You hit the crash target dead centre."

"Uh-huh," she agreed dismally. "Real precision flying. But that doesn't help me get out of here. And please don't say 'dead.'"

"Are you hurt?" Boomer joined Starbuck at the water's edge.

"Well, I think ferrocrete is softer than water when you hit at the speed I did. If I hadn't had my eyes closed, I think I'd've seen the Viper bounce -- it sure felt like it did. I hit my arm pretty hard, but I don't think it's broken. I can move it; I'd just rather not."

"Can you walk?" Boomer inquired anxiously.

"Oh, sure," came her laconic reply. "But where?"

"Just walk along the bottom," Starbuck said casually. "Or swim, if you think you can. You'll get thoroughly wet, but your helmet will supply oxygen."

"I never thought of that," Boomer commented.

"It may work," Sheba admitted. "But which way do I walk? I can't see a thing; this water's murky." She had never felt so alone.

"Well, I don't think that matters a whole lot," Boomer temporized. "It's a small lake..."

"No, wait!" Starbuck ran to his Viper. "Yes!" he called triumphantly. "The scanner is detailed

enough to show orientation. Sheba, the nose of your Viper is zero; the tail is one-eighty. Your course direct to us is two-two-seven. Is your compass working?"

"Yes!" she cried eagerly. "I'm going to blow the canopy; it's stuck anyway. Stand by."

Boomer and Starbuck stared at one another, neither daring even to think. The sound of explosive bolts was loud over the com; they both held their breaths, waiting.

"Whew!"

"Sheba! Are you all right?" Starbuck demanded.

"Yeah," she replied, a little breathless. "But I feel like a Cylon just clouted me over the head."

"Status?" Boomer tried to maintain a more formal tone.

"Oh, I'm all right," she assured them. "I'm on my way."

"All right." Starbuck turned to Boomer. "Do any of the Vipers carry magnesium flares in their survival kits?"

Boomer stared blankly for a moment, then grinned; magnesium burned brilliantly, even under water. "Sure. The Captain's Viper does."

"So we wait for Apollo," Starbuck said as he checked the environmental tell-tales and turned off the force-screen visor of his helmet. "Yecch!" He grimaced. "This place stinks!"

Boomer followed suit, and immediately agreed. They both stood by the lake shore, scanning the sky for Apollo, Athena, and Vi. It certainly seemed to be taking the rest of their detachment a long time to reach them.

"There's Athena!" A Viper swooped in from the north, buzzed low over the city, and came to a perfect landing only metres from the two watching men.

"Hello!" the pilot called as she climbed out. "Where's Sheba?"

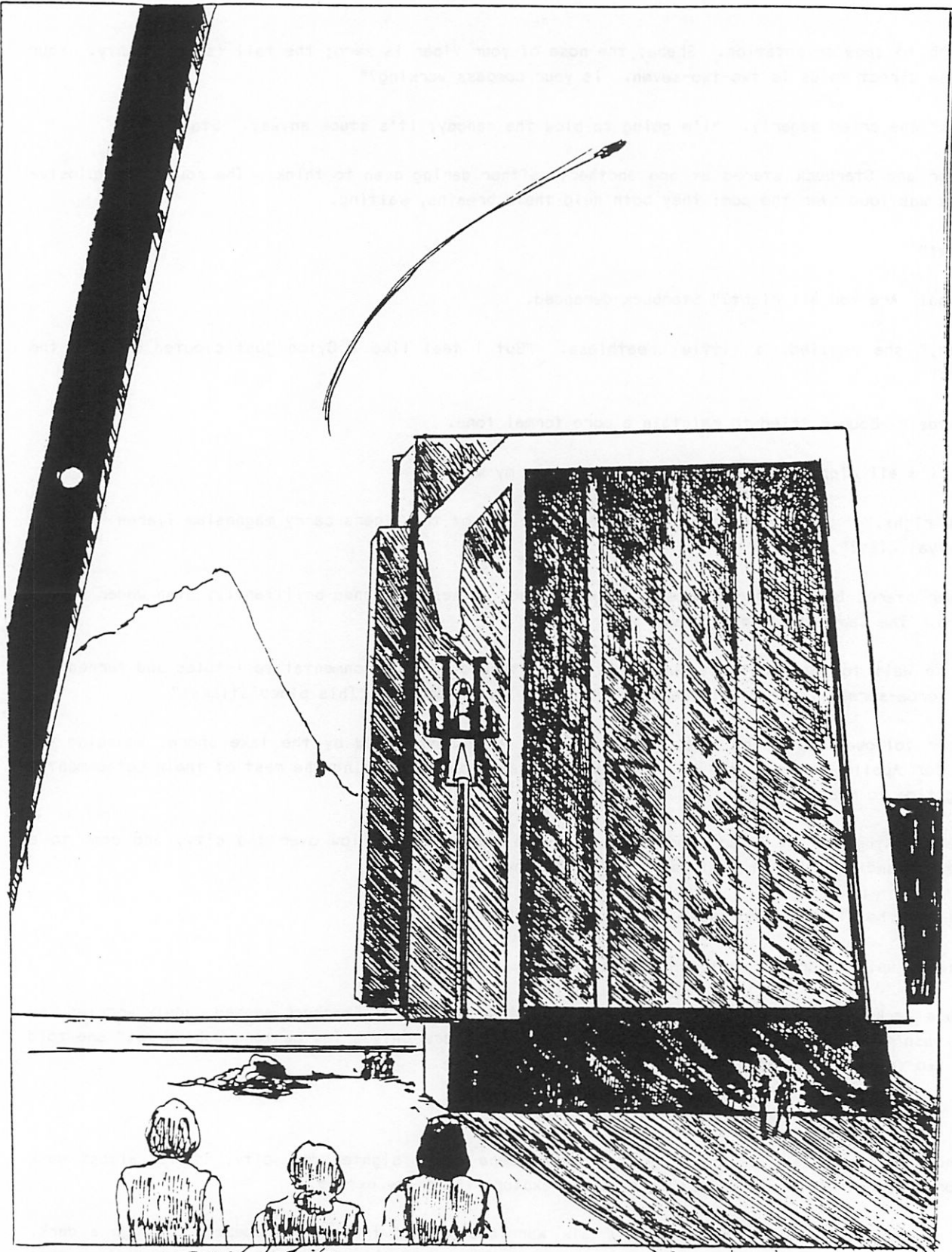
"Walking up." Starbuck gestured at the lake.

Athena looked a little dubious at that, but neither Boomer nor Starbuck seemed unduly worried, so she wasn't really overly concerned. "Apollo and Vi are only a few centons behind me," she told her two friends. "They'll be here soon."

* * * * *

Although it had been bright afternoon when Sheba first sighted the city, it was almost dusk before the patrol from the GALACTICA got to explore it to any extent.

Carrying torches to light their way, six Warriors walked from the spaceport through a dark, haunted city of death. Everywhere, they were surrounded by the shadows of slagged buildings that seemed to glide past them in the steady torchlight. Sunset gradually deepened the sky from light lavender through violet to a deep, profound purple, which slowly gave way to the blackness of night.



"Look! Look up there!" Vi pointed skyward, speaking very softly so as not to awaken the shadows.

The patrol looked up. The planet's single small moon had acquired a swiftly moving companion. Not at all round, the new satellite was long and narrow, and brighter than its natural partner.

The six Warriors smiled as one. It was comforting to know that the GALACTICA was nearby. It seemed, somehow, to make them all less nervous. Until that moment, they had walked silently, hating even the necessary sounds of their boots on the artificial glass pavement of the murdered city. But knowing they were not merely six against a world lightened their hearts, and they began to talk amongst themselves.

Their goal wasn't far off, either; it wasn't more than a few centons later that Apollo stopped. "There it is."

Across an open courtyard of some kind, now boiled and bubbled, was a building. It was of native stone and monumental in size, obviously a public edifice of some sort. It had been totally untouched by whatever had killed the city.

Wide, clean steps led up to three triplets of solid, heavily ornamented doors. The Captain led the way up, the others following, silent and vigilant.

The door he tried swung open easily at Apollo's touch, and he flashed his torch around inside. Their entire trip had been accomplished without seeing any other living thing, but that didn't mean there were none.

He pushed the door open wider, and his light revealed a vast open expanse which apparently took up all but insignificant portions of the ground floor. In the very centre, a wide, curved staircase led up to the second floor and split, forming a balcony that encircled the entire ground floor at a height of about twelve metres.

The six craned their necks, amazed that such magnificence should exist in the midst of such desolation.

Apollo shrugged, more to himself than to anyone else. "I guess we go up," he observed.

"There's sure nothing down here," Vi agreed.

They trudged up the stairs, scattering along the balcony.

"Here." They all spoke quietly; incautious noise raised unwanted echoes. Sheba, more than a little uncomfortable in her wet uniform, had found another staircase behind a translucent door. She looked up as the others joined her, and counted aloud.

"Two, three, four, five, six platforms; at least three other floors, and maybe six. We'll be here for days." She didn't sound enthusiastic. The quilting of her uniform was still sodden, despite her efforts to squeeze it dry, and she wanted to do nothing so much as go home. "Probably three," she mused.

"Why don't we split up?" Boomer suggested. "Three pairs can search faster than one group of six."

"Yes, we're not looking for detail, just whether or not to send for an intensive search team," Starbuck agreed. "Athena and I can cover the top floor."

Athena's eyes lit up; Apollo didn't miss it.

"Just be sure you look for maps and texts, Bucko. You're both on duty, you know." Boomer grinned. "But it's probably best, Captain. Vi and I can check the second floor down. Do you and Sheba want to hit both of these floors?"

Apollo grinned wryly. "Not really; it would take too long. We'll check out the floor one level up. As you finish, come on down, and we'll check this one out together."

"Sounds good. Let's go." Sheba was impatient to get the ordeal over with.

"Good hunting!" Apollo called as the others continued up the stairs. "And good luck!"

Vi grinned at Boomer, and he returned it. "This may be the most entertaining book search in the history of the GALACTICA."

Starbuck laughed aloud, sending rollicking echoes through the empty building. "C'mon, Athena. Let's go check out the penthouse."

* * * * *

Apollo and Sheba went down the main corridor, trying doors to see if they would open. A good many of them were locked, and the Captain debated the advisability of forcing a few of them.

"There are just too many," Sheba demurred. "You could use up the entire charge of your laser to open them all, and we'd probably not find anything. The whole floor seems to have been for bookkeeping and records, and it's all in the computer." She gestured bitterly at what was obviously a terminal at each desk in one room. "And we don't know the access codes! I can't even read their writing!"

Apollo sighed. "I suppose. But I have to try a few." He pulled his weapon and aimed it at the next door, which sizzled and smoked as he fired. Then he holstered the laser as he pushed the door open. "Nothing," he muttered in disgust.

Sheba slammed the door shut as they left, and the Captain, startled, demanded to know what was wrong.

"What's wrong?" she repeated shrilly. "I got shot down by automatic machinery, and lost my ship, so I can't go home. I never lost a GALACTICA Viper before, and this one isn't even salvageable! We have an entire building to search, and we don't know how to read their language! My uniform is dripping wet no matter what I do; it's cold, and it's starting to chafe... And you want to know what's wrong?"

Apollo knew nothing he could say would make any difference, so he didn't even try. He just moved closer and put his arms around her. Her barriers all dissolved at his touch, and she sobbed on his shoulder.

It was only a few moments before she regained control of herself and pulled away. "This is no way for a Warrior to act," she whispered shamefacedly.

"Hey, it's all right," he assured her. "Even Warriors have limits."

"Yeah, sure. If I was in command, and all that happened to you, would you cry on my shoulder?"

"I don't think so," he admitted candidly. "Sometimes, I've wished I could. But I'm a male product of a male-oriented society that frowns on men crying in public. I'd probably react by

getting snappy and irritable and hard to get along with -- just like you were before."

Sheba looked at him and laughed wryly. "You're so gallant, Apollo."

"Well," he said cheerfully, "you feel better now, don't you?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"All right, then."

They walked down the corridor hand in hand.

* * * * *

Starbuck and Athena were just a little breathless by the time they reached the top floor. Neither was accustomed to climbing stairs.

"Whew! I'm glad we have lifts on the GALACTICA! I wouldn't want to have to do this too often." Starbuck felt his way carefully. He and Athena had not been on the best of terms lately, but she was so ecstatic over having an adventure that she'd probably have been civil to Baltar himself.

"I don't like stairs either," she agreed. She stepped out into the corridor, looking in both directions. "Well, which way first?"

"I don't know," he began.

Suddenly, she shivered, and Starbuck automatically put his arm around her, pulling her closer. "Hey, what's the matter?" he asked quietly.

"I'm...I'm not sure." She shook her head deliberately, then smiled at him. "I've never been on a landing party before. I think it's reorientation shock." She was referring to the sudden disorientation that occurred every time they landed on a new planet. The differences, both large and small, lay in wait under the explorer's cultivated acceptance, and hit together. For experienced travellers, it was only a momentary feeling of strangeness.

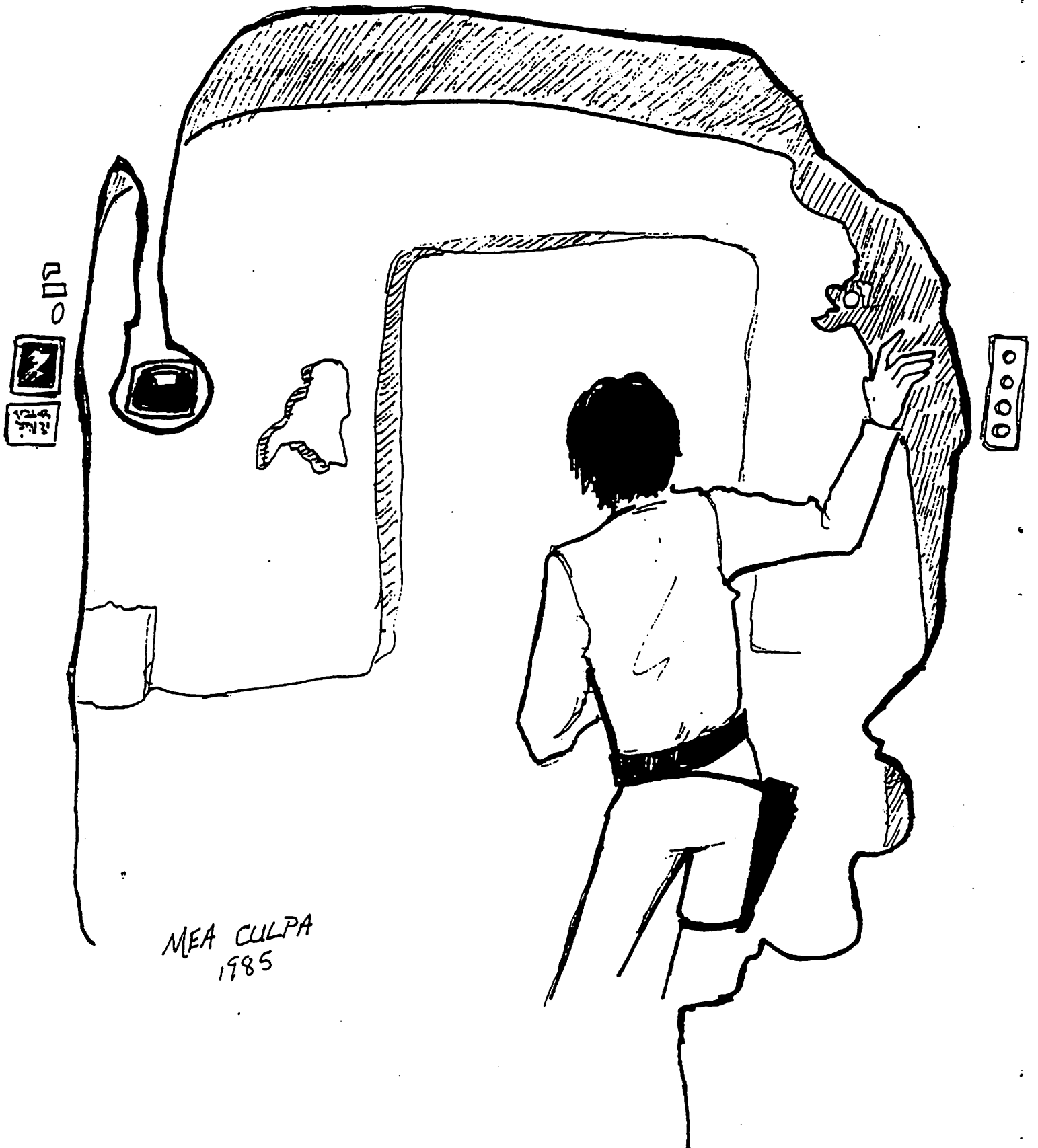
"Uh-huh." Starbuck was frankly skeptical. "And you've been to every colony and outpost in Caprica Sector. Reorientation shock. Sure."

"Well, the only other explanation is silly." She continued to smile, but her eyes were shadowed.

"Yeah?" His obvious interest reassured her -- she felt no inclination to make a fool of herself. "Try me."

"Well, Father took courses in paramental faculties; he can move small objects without touching them if he thinks about them properly. He told me about some of the other things it's theoretically possible for us to do. Apparently, it can't be taught. Either you can do it, or you can't, although most people improve with practice. One is a sort of fortune-telling called precognition. The books say it works best when the subject is under stress. Father tested all of us. He tested out high; so did Apollo and me. But Mom and Zac were really out of it." She paused for a long moment, then looked solemnly at the blond Warrior beside her.

"You know, Starbuck, I'll bet you'd test out higher even than Apollo. Your famous 'luck' is probably you subconsciously knowing where the enemy will fire next, or whatever."



"Could be," he allowed. "Sometimes, I feel like I know where the manta-ships will go, or where they'll be when I get there -- it's kinda like seeing everything three or four microns ahead of what I'm really seeing...if that makes any sense. But what's all this got to do with you catching a chill?"

She shook her head. "I wasn't cold," she said quietly.

There seemed nothing to say to that, so they walked together down the corridor, testing doors. Finally, Starbuck broke the somewhat strained silence by commenting disgustedly, "I don't think any of these things open."

"I think you're right." Athena eyed the next door rather dubiously. While all the others had single letters followed by what seemed to be words stencilled on them, this one was adorned by a single word followed by three letters. She shrugged and tried it. To her amazement, it opened easily.

"Starbuck! Look at this!" she exclaimed.

"It opened?" He joined her from the other side of the hallway, where he had fruitlessly been trying yet another door. He looked over her shoulder as she pushed the door open wider and stepped inside. Then he followed her in, and they stared, wide-eyed with awe.

"Lords!" Starbuck gasped at last. Athena remained speechless.

All around them were rows of film canisters, racked on shelves stretching from floor to ceiling, lining every available centimetre of wall space. There were four additional shelf units standing freely in the middle of the floor.

The very enormity of the find stunned both Warriors.

"It will take sectars to sift all this," Athena murmured when she finally found her voice.

"Yeah... There's no point in you and me even trying," Starbuck agreed. "Let's go tell the others." He followed her back to the exit.

Neither of them saw the door across the room, the one marked "A," open; but Starbuck whirled, drawing his laser, when he heard a sharp hiss behind him. He never completed the motion. A foul odour reached him; it seemed to clog his mind, severing its contact with his body. He fell, never noticing when Athena collapsed beside him.

The door to Room A closed.

* * * * *

"Well, so much for that level," Vi commented.

"Finally," Sheba added sourly.

"Girls, girls!" Boomer chided them. But before they could both turn on him, he had switched his attention to their commander and voiced the question uppermost in all their minds. "Apollo, do you suppose Starbuck and Athena found something? They've been gone quite a while." His tone was just a little worried.

Apollo nodded. "They must have," he agreed, "even if it was only a quiet corner."

The black Warrior shook his head. "Would you, if you weren't in command?"

Apollo glanced at Sheba, then shook his own head quickly. "Not on duty."

"Well, neither would Starbuck. Let's go see what they found that they can't tear themselves away from long enough to tell us about."

The other Warriors followed him. They discovered that every door on the top floor was locked, with one exception. That one opened easily at Boomer's touch. He stepped through it rather cautiously, then sucked in his breath. "Apollo!" he snapped as he ran toward a corner of the room.

"What is it?" The Captain couldn't see what the other man had found until Boomer turned and silently held up two Colonial gunbelts, both with the lasers still secure in their holsters.

"Then it wasn't what they found..." Vi's voice trailed off; this was not the time for such a trite cliché.

* * * * *

When Apollo reported the loss of two Warriors under decidedly suspicious circumstances, Adama threw all available personnel into the search. It was a large city, but most of it had been melted on the spot in whatever disaster had overtaken it, so there couldn't be too many places to hide two humans.

The searchers, in their pre-landing briefing, all heard a dispassionate Colonel Tigh explain what the original landing party had discovered. "After they found the discarded weapon belts, Captain Apollo ordered a thorough search of the rest of the suite. There were three rooms adjoining the one in which the lasers were found. They were all video-taping studios. These tapes were made of the studio on the left."

The room darkened, and a scene flashed to life on one wall. Obviously a recording studio, it contained three cameras on dollies, a slightly raised stage, and what was probably a small sound and mixing booth.

On the stage were two tripodal frames, each about two and a third metres tall. Suspended from the apex of each was what had once been a human being. But the victims had obviously been tortured to death, and the cameras had, just as obviously, busily recorded every detail.

The assembled Warriors gasped; two fled the room, hands clamped over their mouths.

"This," came Tigh's relentless voice, "was a lesson someone left for someone else. The fact that the bodies have not been buried or otherwise disposed of argues that whoever did this is still in control of the building. And, therefore, they are most likely the people holding Lieutenant Starbuck and Ensign Athena."

There were several muffled sobs of horror, which the Colonel ignored.

A young Ensign timidly raised his hand. "Sir...? Those..." He gestured vaguely at the screen, trying not to look at it. "Those are definitely not our Warriors?"

"They are definitely not." Tigh's conviction reassured them all. "These people were killed well over a sector before Captain Apollo's landing party found them." He looked down at his notes and sighed. "Right now, that is all we know for certain. Your mission is to find our Warriors --

or, failing that, collect any data we might possibly use to find them. Dismissed."

The Warriors dispersed silently.

* * * * *

Starbuck's first conscious sensation was one of pain, a growing, branching agony that flooded his entire body with fire. He twisted, not truly aware that he was tied down, but realizing he could neither avoid nor escape the pain.

He was totally unaware of Athena standing beside him, trying to soothe him while screaming her hatred at another man. "You're an animal!" she spat.

"Ah, but we all are," purred her opponent. "Look at your companion here; he acts like a coyote I caught in a trap once. He twists and pulls, but he does not stop to reason. Force is seldom the answer."

"You have the antidote -- give it to him, Jiesser!"

"I? But why would I want to do that? Really, Athena, you are not thinking. While I hold him helpless, I have you helpless as well."

She stared deliberately into the man's face, then turned and sat down in a corner, calmly turning her back on the room. Starbuck, unaware, moaned in agony, and she closed her eyes sympathetically. But she refused to move.

Jiesser said nothing for several moments, waiting. But when she showed no sign of relenting, he finally forced a laugh and said, "Here, catch!" In the same instant, he tossed a small glass vial at her.

Quick as a bat, the Ensign whirled and pounced on it. Ignoring Jiesser completely, she twisted off the stopper and held Starbuck's head still as she poured the vial's contents into his mouth.

He choked on it, then swallowed. Almost immediately, the pain began to subside. Slowly, the tension flowed out of him, until he lay limply on the table to which he was bound. He opened his eyes and looked blankly at Athena.

She didn't speak to him, but held his hand tightly. His eyes were drawn to movement, and he stared, unbelievably, at the steel collar around her neck, and the thin strong chain depending from it.

"Now what, Jiesser?" the woman demanded. Starbuck followed her gaze and saw a tall, lean man, his blond hair cropped very short, wearing a uniform that teased the Colonial with its familiarity. But he couldn't place it in his memory.

He didn't understand what Athena wanted, but it was patently obvious that they were both prisoners of the blond Jiesser. Athena knew more about what was going on than he did, so he didn't interrupt with all the questions he wanted to ask. If they had time later, he would ask Athena; if they had no time, it wouldn't really matter.

"Well..." Jiesser drew the word out. "I could start right away. But I will give you a few minutes to talk before I begin with the Lieutenant. I will return shortly."

The man's words, so lightly spoken, sent a chill down Starbuck's spine.



"Athena, what's going on?" he demanded as soon as they were alone.

She knelt beside him so she could talk quietly. "We're prisoners of the Eastern Alliance," she began.

"Leiter's crew," he interrupted, the uniform suddenly fitting into his recall.

"I don't know if he's here himself," she admitted. "We walked into a trap for refugees like Michael and Sarah. Jiesser doesn't know anything about us except our names and that we're pilots; that's all I told him."

"When?" Starbuck struggled to break his bonds, and, as she answered, Athena tried to free him.

"Just before you started waking up. That's what the pain was -- the nerve gas wearing off."

"Oh." He thought for a centon. "Did he tell you any of his plans for us?"

She nodded once, and looked away. "He said he was going to turn us into traitors. You're going to commit sabotage, and I'm going to commit murder."

"He sounds very sure of himself," Starbuck commented. The bonds holding him were firm, and he gave up trying to break them.

"He is that. He's evil!" she asserted.

"Well, we've met evil before, love. Remember Count...Count Iblis..." He hesitated, then shook his head, trying to clear it. His vision was suddenly blurred, and he was finding it difficult to think clearly.

"Starbuck?" Athena was worried. "Starbuck!" She watched in paralyzed horror as his face slowly went blank and empty, and his eyes half-closed. He didn't respond to her calling his name, and rolled limply when she shook him. "Starbuck!"

"Ah, I see that the dominazine has taken effect." The cheery voice came from the doorway, and Athena wheeled abruptly.

Jiesser stood there, smiling, a tray in his hands. On it were a bottle, a pitcher, and a glass. He set it on a small table beside the larger one on which Starbuck lay, and poured a light golden liquid from the bottle into the glass.

"Now, girl, you will have the rare opportunity of watching Rudolph Jiesser work. Few have been so privileged."

He pulled a comfortable chair from the rear of the room and placed it beside Starbuck, then adjusted its position precisely before turning to his female captive.

"Now, we cannot have you interfering, can we, my dear?" He knew she had immediately noticed that the chair was well within her reach, and he would have been seated with his back to her. "Now, be a good girl, and go sit in the corner."

Stubbornly, Athena did not move.

The man went to a control panel near the door and turned a dial. "Go back and sit in the corner, Ensign. I will not tell you again." There was no humour left in his voice.

"Then I shan't have to move, shall I?" she retorted.

He pushed a button on the wall panel, and she choked, collapsing as an electrical charge hit her through the metal collar. Jiesser nodded in approval.

"You will learn," was all he said as he pushed another button. A hidden motor whined. Athena watched silently as the slack of her chain was taken up, disappearing into the wall. When she had a movement radius of less than two metres, Jiesser stopped the motor.

"And you shall stay there while I make of your friend the young Lieutenant a pawn in my colour."

He turned away, totally dismissing Athena from his mind, and seated himself comfortably, adjusting everything precisely. Then he placed his right hand on Starbuck's forehead.

"Lieutenant Starbuck, can you hear me?" Jiesser's voice was very low, and Athena had to strain to hear him.

Without moving, Starbuck whispered, "Yes."

"Will you obey me?"

"No." The response was flat and emotionless.

"I see," Jiesser commented in a more normal tone. He carefully positioned one hand on each side of the Colonial's head. He said nothing aloud, but Starbuck twisted in his bonds. Jiesser exerted only enough strength to keep the Warrior's head still as he concentrated harder.

Athena sat with her arms wrapped around her knees and her chin resting on them. She bit her lip hard, not understanding. As far as she could tell, Jiesser wasn't doing anything -- but Starbuck was in obvious agony, twisting and writhing in his bonds. He was fighting hard, so hard she was afraid he would break an arm straining against the cuffs that held him to the table. Just as she was about to shout, desperate to do something to distract their captor from whatever he was doing, he stopped, taking his hands away from his prisoner, who instantly went limp.

Jiesser sat motionless for a moment, then reached for the glass on the tray; his hands were shaking. Using both hands, he held the glass to his lips and took a long swallow.

"This is going to take much longer than I thought," he muttered.

Athena smiled grimly.

* * * * *

"No luck, huh?" a black-shirted Security officer openly sneered at Apollo and Boomer as they wearily entered the Rec Room. They'd been searching the city for two solid days, and hadn't found the slightest clue. They gloomily greeted Jolly, who didn't speak.

"Well, what do you expect?" the black-shirt continued loudly. "Warriors don't know frak about detective work. Now, Security..."

The man never finished his sentence; goaded beyond endurance, and crazed with grief and worry, Apollo attacked him. The Captain had his moronic victim on the floor and was trying to erase his face on it before Boomer and Jolly could react.



"Apollo! Apollo! Get off him! You'll kill him!" Their shouts finally pierced the fog of rage, and he let them drag him away.

"Let's get out of here," he murmured thickly, rubbing his bruised, skinned knuckles. "I need some clean air." Boomer waved even Jolly back, and guided the Captain into the corridor. Cassiopeia, running in their direction, collided abruptly with Apollo.

"I...I was coming to see you..." She faltered at the sight of their forbidding expressions. "You...you didn't find anything, did you?"

"No." Apollo was curt.

"Nothing today, but maybe tomorrow..." Boomer sounded hopeful, but only in comparison to the Captain's despair.

Apollo turned on him. "Not today, not tomorrow, not ever! They're dead! You know it, and I know it, and there's nothing you can do or say that can change it. We aren't ever going to find them, so we might as well pack up and leave!"

He fled, and, wisely, his friend just watched him go.

Cassiopeia was horrified. "He's... They're dead...?" Her eyes were filled with grief.

Boomer was almost as depressed as Apollo. "We don't know for certain, Cassie, but it's been over sixty centars since anyone's seen them alive. The Commander's announced that after ninety, he's calling off the search." He looked away miserably.

Sadly, Cassiopeia put her arm around him, and they went to the Officers' Club together.

* * * * *

Athena sat on the floor, nursing an almost-crushed hand. She'd wrapped her leash around it to protect her throat, and had tried to pull the chain out of the wall. She'd failed, and now, helplessly, she watched as Jiesser continued his work on Starbuck.

Jiesser, too, showed signs of strain. His captive was thrashing around so violently that his wrists were bleeding, cut while he strained against the metal cuffs.

Athena gasped in horror as Starbuck gave one final, massive convulsion, cried out wildly, then collapsed utterly.

Jiesser went quite limp in his chair, and he, too, didn't move for several centons. Athena had to look closely to see if Starbuck was still breathing; Jiesser was panting.

"Finally." He sighed, struggled to his feet, and staggered out, leaving the two Warriors alone.

Starbuck remained motionless for a long time. At first, the woman left him alone, believing he needed the rest. But after a while, when she tried to rouse him and failed, she began to worry. There was nothing she could do, however; her chain was too short to reach him. She shouted herself hoarse, but he didn't respond.

Finally, when she had just about decided he was never going to wake up, Starbuck stirred.

"Oh, frak," he breathed. He had moved one arm; the dried blood on his wrist had cracked

painfully.

"Starbuck?" she called hopefully.

"Yeah..." He had no voice, and no strength; Athena could see what a strain it had been for him to say just that one short syllable. She hesitated, trying to think of a way to phrase all her questions so he could give yes-or-no answers.

"Are you all right?"

He tried to laugh, and almost choked. "Fine," was what he managed to say, and even his whisper was bitter. "'S nuthin'...wrong...wi'...me...tha'..." He stiffened. "He's comin'." Ignoring the pain, he clenched his fists.

"What?" She was confused. "How do you know?"

But before Starbuck could marshal the strength to answer, the door opened. Jiesser came in, looking bright and cheerful. "And how are my two subjects today?" he asked gaily.

Starbuck tried to raise one clenched fist, and his tormentor shook his head reprovingly. "Why, Lieutenant," he chided, "that is anatomically impossible for any normal human."

Starbuck shook his head carefully. Jiesser's smile was cold. "And I am human, and I am normal. Physically, at least."

The man turned back into the corridor, and again brought in a tray. Athena couldn't see where it had come from, but it held a carafe and three glasses. Thus reminded, she only then became aware of her own desperate thirst, and realized that Starbuck's must be torturing. She looked longingly at the carafe, but refused to ask. Either Jiesser would share, or he would not, but she would not beg him for water.

He filled a glass and handed it to her without a word, then poured the other two full as well, and tasted one. He resumed his seat beside Starbuck.

"Leave him alone!" Athena threw her empty glass at him. "Haven't you done enough to him?" The glass struck him on the shoulder and fell, shattering on the floor.

"No, my dear, not quite enough." He ignored her completely then, settling into his chair and taking Starbuck's head between his hands. The Warrior twisted out of his grasp, trying to delay the inevitable.

"Lie still, Lieutenant." Jiesser's voice was stern, and Starbuck froze.

The man's hands steadied, and his eyes closed. His captive moaned, balling his fists.

"No...no..." The Colonial's voice faded away.

"You will." Jiesser was supremely confident.

"I...I...will..." Starbuck whispered, utterly dejected.

"You will."

"Yes."

Athena watched in amazement as Jiesser stood and freed Starbuck. "Stand up, Lieutenant," he ordered.

Starbuck rolled to his feet, and just as promptly fell. The command was repeated remorselessly. He struggled to his feet again in determined obedience, holding onto the edge of the table. At last, he stood, swaying with weakness, but triumphant.

"Stay there," was the only reward he received, as Jiesser turned to Athena. She retreated as far as her leash would permit. As he bent to take a firm hold of her arm, she exploded into violent action, fighting to be free.

"Starbuck!"

Jiesser was rather hard-pressed. Athena was fighting with all the skill and fury of a trained warrior, and only her half-crippled hand and her chain hampered her enough to give the man any advantage.

She was almost free when she was suddenly grabbed from behind. Twisting around to fight this new enemy, she paled in dismay. "Starbuck!" He took hold of her arms, and she was too shocked at his treason to even try to break his hold on her. "Starbuck!"

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Jiesser took her away from Starbuck and frog-marched her to the table. The other warrior stood where he had been left, swaying slightly.

"Sit in the corner, Lieutenant." Starbuck obeyed silently, leaning gratefully against the wall. He watched as Jiesser clipped the restraining cuffs over Athena's wrists and ankles; once she was secured, he unfastened her collar. It fell away from her neck when he pushed a button on the wall panel. He picked it up and tossed it negligently at Starbuck, who ignored it completely, even when it struck him in the face; his only reaction was to blink.

Athena was so distraught over Starbuck's condition that she hardly noticed what Jiesser was about to do to her. The blond Lieutenant's intractability, independence, and unpredictability were among his major character traits. That body sitting in the corner she had so recently vacated was more like an android double of the man she knew. It looked like him, but it could never be him.

This agonized recital continued until her mind blurred. She vaguely heard Jiesser say that her dose of the initializing drug had been in the water she had so cooperatively drunk; then her world was filled with pain that swept her up, engulfed her, and carried her away.

Starbuck watched dully. He was utterly exhausted, and wanted nothing so much as some sleep. But he had received no orders, and was uncertain as to whether it was permitted. So he stayed awake. He was only marginally aware of Athena's existence. She was a moving shape that made small, stifled sounds. Somewhere deep inside his mind, where the Master couldn't reach, something was shouting, screaming at him to get up and free her, to escape. But the small voice had no authority; he tried to ignore it.

The idea slowly occurred to him that the orders he had been given would cause irreparable harm to his friends, his Commander, his ship, his people. Even more gradually came the conviction that he was going to figure out a way to avoid obedience. He knew he couldn't disobey; if the Master told him to slit his own throat, he knew he would do so. So the dilemma lay in finding a way to avoid obeying.

On the table, Athena's wrists began to bleed, staining the already reddened surface.



PART II

"Captain Apollo! Captain Apollo!" A young Cadet named Ganymede, whom Apollo had sourly labelled "kay-det" days before for his effervescent enthusiasm, came running headlong into the temporary camp in the city's melted-down market-place.

"What is it, Cadet?" The Captain was in no mood to be trifled with; Adama had just lectured him over the com for his fight with the man from Security.

"Sir, we've found a hidden entrance to a sub-basement. It was connected to the upper floors by a private lift. It seems to be occupied; the dust on the floor had been disturbed before Cadet Hebe and I found it."

Apollo whirled. "Boomer!" he yelled. "Jolly! Greenbean! Get over here!"

The trio he summoned came bursting out of a shelter, demanding information.

"We've got a lead," the Captain informed them tersely. "You lead, Cadet. Where's Hebe?"

Ganymede grinned proudly. "He's guarding the entrance. No one will enter or leave without him seeing them."

"Good work. Let's go."

Four grim Warriors followed the glowing Cadet away from the sleeping camp.

* * * * *

"Lords of Kobol!" Apollo murmured. "There's another entire city under here!" They'd had no trouble entering. The corridors were dusty, but adequately illuminated, and obviously used. Evidently, the place was being maintained. They'd been walking on full alert, with their side-arms out and ready, but had not found any sign of habitation. All the doors were open, all the rooms empty.

Apollo, in the lead, turned a corner without looking first, lulled by their apparent solitude. He retreated from a bullet, then whipped back around the corner, returning fire. He killed his opponent, a slim blond man wearing a familiar-looking uniform, but not before the man had pushed an alarm button. A wild, roaring siren screamed over their heads. The Colonials heard shouts of confusion and the sounds of running feet.

"Well, at least we know they're down here," the Captain remarked, a little embarrassed.

"Yeah," Boomer replied rather drily, "but they know we're here, too."

* * * * *

The screaming, deafening siren aroused Jiesser from his work. He looked around, only mildly surprised and not at all upset, and placed both his hands flat over Athena's face.

She screamed, her entire body arching against the torment. After she collapsed, he removed his hands. Before he left the room to make good his escape, he turned and checked the chamber.

"Starbuck!" he snapped.

The Lieutenant raised his head slowly.

"Put that collar on yourself now." He watched as the Colonial fumbled it on, then pushed the button that locked it. When he left, he was chuckling a little at their rescuers' joy; it would be short-lived. Of course, so would the prisoners. But first, they would do their jobs.

* * * * *

"We need a prisoner," Boomer observed. "We don't know where to go."

"Will he do?" Jolly, who had been acting as rear guard, snagged a man who tried to run through the corridor intersection they had just traversed.

"Quite nicely," Apollo told him happily. "Where are the prisoners kept?" he demanded.

"I won't talk!" the captive snarled.

"No?" Boomer smiled, and it was not a pleasant smile. From somewhere, he produced a knife -- small, thin-bladed, with an edge so sharp the steel seemed to vanish into transparency. "I can get him to talk, Captain," he purred. "Like I did that prisoner on Elesia."

The Cadets exchanged glances, shocked at what they thought they'd just heard. Behind their captive, Jolly and Greenbean grinned. That was Boomer's cigar-trimming knife, and Elesia had once been a well-frequented casino on one of Caprica's moons.

Apollo understood, and played along. "That's not necessary, Lieutenant. At least, not yet..." He let his voice trail off ominously. "I repeat -- where are the prisoners kept?"

Their own prisoner swallowed nervously, but didn't reply. Boomer reached over and pinked his throat.

"Lieutenant!" Apollo snapped, real anger evident in his voice.

"Yes, sir." The black man shrugged, and stepped back.

"Last chance. Where are the prisoners kept?"

There was a long, tense silence, and Boomer moved the narrow blade so it reflected a flash of light into the prisoner's eyes. The captive jumped, startled, then gestured savagely back the way he had come. "Fourth room to the left. And much good may it do you!"

Apollo stared at him for a moment, then motioned to Boomer, who put the knife away with visible reluctance.

"Bring him," was all the Captain said as he led the way down the corridor. He stopped in front of the fourth door. "Ganymede, you and Hebe have charge of the prisoner. You are to stay alert out here; I don't like surprises."

"Yes, sir!" they chorused eagerly.



Apollo turned to Boomer, Jolly, and Greenbean, and found there was no need to say anything. He took a deep breath, and opened the door.

Inside, Starbuck heard Apollo's voice instructing the Cadets. It triggered his resolution. He cast about desperately, looking for something to hide behind, anything that could conceal him from his friends' search of the room. There was a couch in one corner; he crawled hurriedly beneath it. His leash was just long enough. He lay down to wait, his heart pounding.

Apollo pushed the door aside and looked in.

"Athena!" He ran to his sister's side. "Athena!" He called her again, and, when she didn't respond, had to fight off the horrible fear that she might be dead. Then she moaned, and her arm moved. That drew his attention to both her bonds and her lacerated wrists. He snapped a few short and forceful curses. "Boomer! Have you got a cutter?"

"No." Boomer stepped to his side. "But I've got a med-kit."

Jolly silently handed the Captain a cutter, and Apollo carefully freed his sister from the table, swearing under his breath as he worked. Boomer helped him with the med-kit.

Greenbean stood nearby, scanning the room curiously. "Okay, we've found Athena. But where's Starbuck?"

Jolly joined him. "Look over there -- that chain's anchored inside the wall on this end. But it's stretched tight. Wonder what it's fastened to..."

Boomer looked up and took everything in with one swift glance. Leaving Apollo to minister to his sister, he went to and stepped around the couch, followed by the other two Warriors.

"Starbuck!" He pushed the couch away from the wall and knelt beside his friend.

Starbuck had fallen asleep, but the sound of his name woke him. He looked up groggily, and cringed away from Boomer.

"Hey, Starbuck, it's all right," the black man said softly. "It's me, Boomer. We've come to take you home."

"No!" Starbuck's voice was shrill, wild with terror. "No! I won't go back!" He tried to huddle in the corner where the couch butted against the wall, but Boomer took hold of his wrists to stop him.

Starbuck reeled in pain, and his friend, shocked, let him go. The steadiness of his voice belied his seething anger at the condition of those wrists. Starbuck rolled himself into a trembling ball in the corner.

"Apollo? You done with that med-kit yet?"

"Just about."

"Hurry up." He looked more closely at Starbuck, whose only injuries seemed to be his wrists. But there was definitely something wrong with him.

"Starbuck," he called gently. "C'mon, Bucko. Cassie's worried about you. C'mon... It's time to go home." Boomer took hold of his arm and tried to pull him out of the corner.

"No!" He screamed -- and that shocked them all. Then he lashed out wildly with his fist, catching Boomer on the chin.

"Starbuck!"

"Leave me, please. Just leave me here, and go away..." His voice faded as he turned to the wall, shivering.

"No, Starbuck, you're coming with us. Jolly, Greenbean, give me a hand here."

The three pilots lifted Starbuck bodily out of his corner. No sooner was he out of it, with a little slack in the chain, than he exploded into battle. When he felled Greenbean with a vicious kick to the jaw, Boomer scientifically decked him.

He fell limply at the black man's feet.

Apollo stared at the unconscious Warrior. "What did they do to him?"

"I don't know," Boomer admitted, massaging bruised knuckles. "But I'd say they were just starting to work on Athena when we interrupted. His wrists are a lot worse than hers.

"Let's get them home."

* * * * *

The GALACTICA was a happy ship again. Her two missing Warriors were home and alive, if not entirely well, and that was enough for the vast majority of their ship-mates. But not, of course, all of them.

It was a full ship-day after the rescue, and the medical teams were baffled. Athena was still unconscious, the tentative diagnosis catatonic withdrawal. Starbuck, at least, could respond to questions; he simply refused to do so. He lay still, pretending to be asleep, violent only when touched; he became thoroughly and uncontrollably hysterical when his friends tried to reach him. Doctor Paye finally gave up and banned all visitors. He also transferred Cassiopeia to Medical Records, fourteen levels nadir.

"It's only temporary, Cassie, until I figure him out."

She bowed her head, understanding. Starbuck's most violent rejection had been of her, although when Commander Adama had come to see him, the Lieutenant had stared at him in utter horror, then collapsed into uncontrollable sobs. The Commander had been stunned at the reaction, and had accepted the doctor's advice, leaving hurriedly.

Alone, Cassie stumbled out of Life Centre and went looking for something; she wasn't certain exactly what. When she found Apollo in the Officers' Club, trying to get drunk, she decided he would do.

The Captain had asked for, and had been given, three days of leave. He was working on his fourth bottle of ambrosia, and the potent liquor still tasted like water. He was lonely. Sheba had pneumonia, and wouldn't be released from Life Centre for at least half a sector. His sister was in a coma, and his best friend was apparently quite insane. Boomer had taken his command, and he welcomed Cassie like a long-lost love.

"Sit down, and have a drink," he invited, his enunciation rather precise.



"Thanks. I think I will." She poured herself four healthy fingers of liquor, and knocked back half of it in one swallow. "Apollo, what can we do?"

He looked away. "About what?" he temporized.

"Please... You know about what. What happened to them? What could have happened down there?" Like most of the crew, she had heard only official releases, with no details.

Apollo described the rescue in as much detail as he could remember, realizing as he did so that he was not nearly as drunk as he might have wished.

"Starbuck didn't want to come home?"

He shook his head glumly. "No. He fought like a wild-bast -- broke Greenbean's jaw, too."

Her eyes widened. "So that's how it happened. I fixed it for him, but he wouldn't tell me about it."

"Well, that's how it happened."

She sipped her drink, and Apollo refilled her glass as well as his own. "You've had psych training, Cassiopeia. What do you think they did to him?"

She looked thoughtful, and sipped again at her drink.

* * * * *

Except for operating stations, the GALACTICA was dark, officially in the middle of sleep period. Only vital and stand-by stations were operative. Life Centre was shadowed and quiet.

Starbuck was suddenly wide awake. He looked around craftily, then rolled lithely out of bed. He dressed hurriedly, and was disturbed that he couldn't find his laser. A driving urgency sent him out into the corridors.

Keeping to dark and shadowy byways, using cargo lifts instead of personnel elevators, he made his way down to Engineering.

Only a few monitors were on duty. He surveyed the scene for several centons, deciding where he would have to work, and which monitors were the most vulnerable. Having made his decision, he slipped silently into the small cubby-hole where a Cadet technician drowsed over the hyperdrive controls.

A single sharp blow to the throat, and the Cadet sagged limply. Starbuck caught him and eased him to the floor. Then he opened a panel and set to work.

He saw everything through an odd, transparent haze. He knew his own hands were fusing the GALACTICA's hyperdrive circuits, his own knowledge guiding them. But it wasn't being done by his own will.

Despite all his struggles, he found himself pushed deeper and deeper into the haze, until he had contact with his body only through his eyes. He was a helpless observer, raging as he watched his body respond to another's orders.

The work done, the panel was closed, and he left Engineering. He didn't know where he was going

next, but presumed he would find out when he got there.

His footsteps led him to Fire Control. There was only one tech on duty, and it was easy to dispose of him. Stepping over the body, Starbuck ripped out all the circuitry, and smashed the boards under his feet, carefully using his boot heel to crush certain vital components. Little else remained to be accomplished, and he found himself leaving.

He walked through dark corridors, through levels he'd been down only once a yahren -- if he'd been unlucky. Eventually, he came to Medical Records.

He knew the Master wanted to find out what diagnoses had been made of himself and Athena. Burglarizing Medical Records seemed a logical way to find out, since neither Doctor Paye nor Doctor Salik would discuss such things in front of a patient.

MedRec was entirely dark, except for a single light far off to one side, where the night attendant sat reading.

Starbuck's heart quailed, for, as he recognized that blonde head, he knew the Master had just had an idea. He tried to call out, to warn her, but got stuffed deeper into the haze. He was barely aware of what happened next.

Cassie turned at the sound of footsteps, and her face lit up when she recognized her visitor. "Starbuck!" she squealed delightedly as she ran to meet him.

"Cassie," was all he said as he hugged her tightly.

"When did Doctor Paye release you?" she asked when she got her breath. "This afternoon, he was thinking of restraining you." Then her hand found his belt, and she realized he was unarmed. She pulled away, still smiling, but a little reprovingly. "You weren't released -- you escaped! Now, Starbuck, you know you're not supposed to..."

"I know what I am supposed to do, and what I will do. And there is nothing you can do about any of it."

She stared into his face, shocked. There was something indefinably threatening about the expression in his eyes, and she retreated a step in confusion. He pulled her back against his body and kissed her brutally. After long moments, he let her pull away, but retained his grip on her arm.

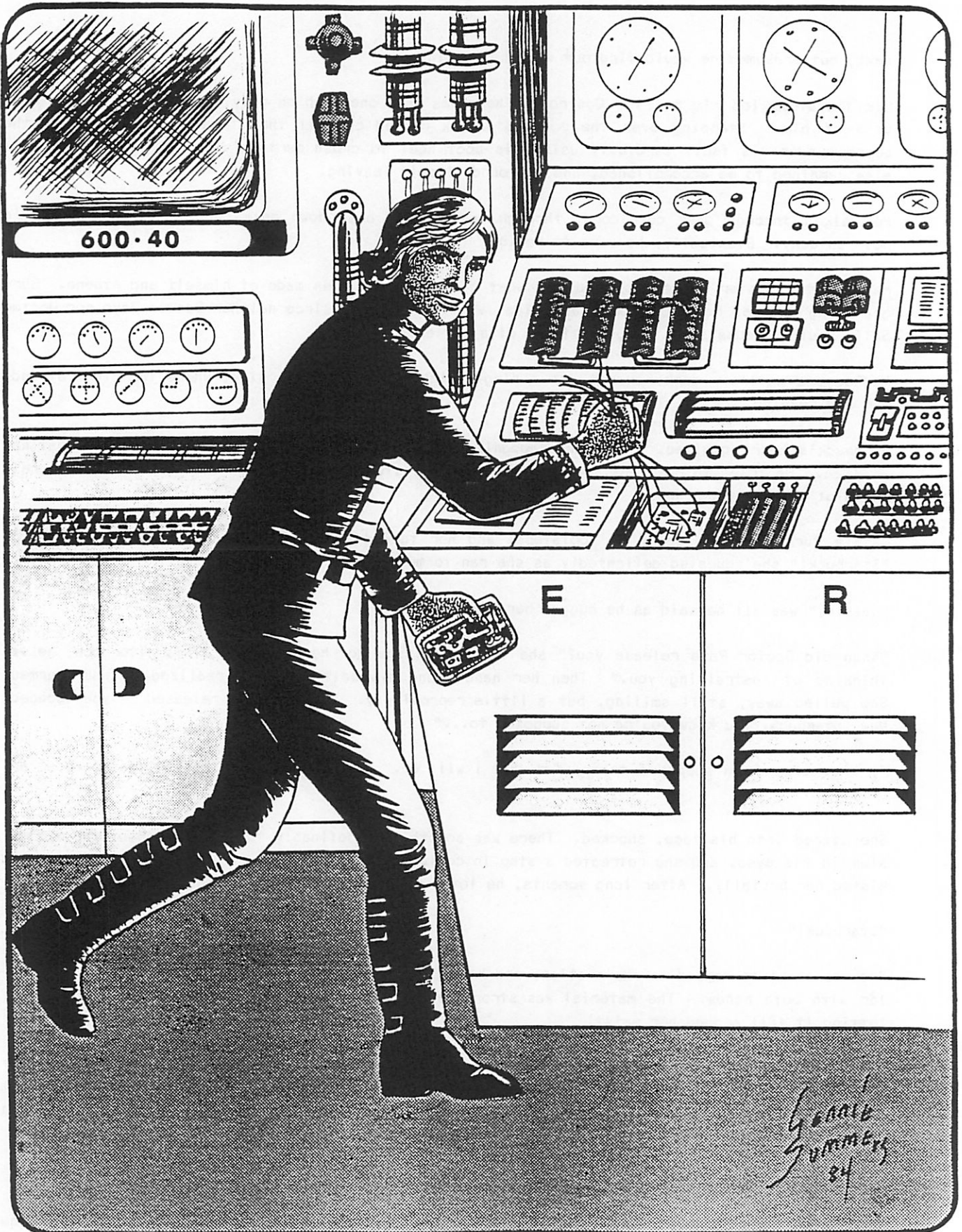
"Starbuck!"

She was about to demand an explanation, and he didn't feel like talking. He took hold of her collar with both hands. The material was strong, and she staggered as he ripped her uniform apart, letting it fall around her waist.

Cassiopeia paled. This was not the Starbuck she knew and loved. She cast about desperately for some way to stop him or to summon aid, but he kept her away from her desk, where the intercom was. There was no point in screaming -- MedRec was five levels deep, and she was the only one on duty. There was no one to hear her.

"Please, Starbuck... When have I ever...?"

He slapped her, hard, seeming to savour her dawning fear. She made as if to struggle, and he twisted her arm savagely up, holding her tightly. She watched, helpless and fully aware of what was coming, as, one-handed, he began to strip.



* * * * *

Apollo couldn't sleep; he was too worried about his sister and about Starbuck. After tossing for several centars, he gave up, got dressed silently, and tip-toed out, careful to avoid waking Boxey, who slept in his own little alcove. He motioned to Muffitt for silence, and for once, the daggit-droid obeyed him.

Out in the corridor, he couldn't immediately decide where to go. Colonel Tigh was probably on the bridge; the Commander was probably asleep. Most of the other pilots were off-duty -- or as off-duty as pilots ever got. So he just started walking, and eventually found himself in the Officers' Club.

He wasn't surprised to find Boomer already there, brooding at a corner table, an untouched drink before him gone warm and flat.

"Hi, Boomer," he said as he sank into the other chair.

His friend just nodded.

"You couldn't sleep either, right?" Apollo signalled the bartender for a drink.

"Right," the black Warrior replied briefly.

They sat in a companionably miserable silence for a while. It was Boomer who finally broke the quiet. "Why didn't he want to come home? What could they have done to him?"

Apollo shook his head. "I don't know. I was talking about this with Cassiopeia earlier, and she's got some theories she's going to put to Doctor Paye in the morning. Let's go see her."

"Sounds good." They left, ignoring the bartender, who had just brought the Captain's drink. He stared after the two Warriors for a moment, then shrugged, and drank it himself.

* * * * *

Cassiopeia wasn't in her quarters. Apollo called Life Centre, and asked for her there.

"Oh, Doctor Paye transferred her to Records until Lieutenant Starbuck recovers; her presence disturbed him too much. She's on duty now."

"Thank you." The Captain turned to his companion. "When the doctor bans visitors, he doesn't kid around, does he?"

"Yeah. So let's go down to Records."

The two Warriors didn't speak much on the way, and what little conversation they indulged in was of neutral matters. Neither of them had ever been to MedRec before, and they got lost twice.

"Here it is -- finally," Apollo growled a little peevishly. He pushed open the door.

His greeting died on his lips. There was a Warrior already there, standing over a motionless body clothed in rags and tatters, a body that could only be Cassiopeia. The Warrior was tucking his blouse back into his trousers, and when he turned slightly, Apollo recognized him.

"Boomer," he whispered, "that's Starbuck, and the Lords alone know what he's done here. We've

got to catch him; he's supposed to be confined to Life Centre."

Boomer nodded, and spoke almost soundlessly. "Be careful. He's a dirty fighter, and right now, he won't care if he hurts you -- remember Greenbean."

"Right. Y'know, in one way, we're lucky -- he's unarmed."

"Yeah. I've never known him to miss."

Except for the light on Cassiopela's desk, the room was dark. Apollo and Boomer had no trouble sneaking up on the preoccupied Starbuck.

The blond Warrior finished dressing, and nudged the girl with the toe of one boot. She didn't respond, and he drew back his foot to kick her. Horrified, Apollo shouted, and attacked.

Startled, Starbuck whirled to meet the Captain's charge, and fell back, pulling Apollo with him. He brought his feet up into his assailant's stomach and tipped him over his head, to crash head-first into a steel bulkhead. Apollo slid to the deck and lay still.

Starbuck rolled quickly to his feet, grabbing the Captain's laser from its holster. He fired a fast shot at Boomer, who fell and rolled for cover behind a carrel, nursing a crippled left arm.

Starbuck smiled quietly. With a gun, he could more leisurely dispose of all the witnesses. He raised it and sighted on Apollo's motionless form.

Boomer saw him and screamed, horrified. "Starbuck! No!"

The blond Warrior whirled and fired all in one motion, but Boomer fired first. Starbuck's shot went wild as he doubled over and crumpled to the deck.

Ignoring his own injury, his friend ran to him and cradled him in his arms. "Starbuck... Starbuck, I'm sorry!"

The badly wounded man opened his eyes; Boomer was amazed to see relief and gratitude mirrored there. Incredibly, he smiled weakly. "Thanks, Boom!..." he whispered. Then his eyes glazed, and he went limp.

His vision blurred by unshed tears, the black man gently laid his friend's too-quiet body down and went to the intercom. "MedRec to Life Centre. There's been a fight down here. Three badly hurt, one...one dead."

He sat down suddenly, realizing that, while most of the blood soaking into his uniform was Starbuck's, a good proportion of it was his own. It was his last conscious thought. Boomer slumped across the desk, and that was where the emergency team found him.

* * * * *

Commander Adama was jarred awake by the intercom buzzing angrily in his ear. He reached out rather groggily to slap it. "Yes, what is it?" he growled, still half-asleep. This had better be good...

"Commander?"

Colonel Tigh's voice was unusually sombre, and that alone was enough to awaken Adama thoroughly.



"Yes, Tigh? What's wrong?"

"Sir, Doctors Salik and Paye request your presence in Life Centre immediately."

"What's happened?" The Commander was dressing even as he spoke.

"Cassiopeia's been beaten and raped. Both Starbuck and Boomer have been shot, and Apollo's been clubbed unconscious."

Adama's first reaction was horror, swiftly followed by overwhelming relief that Apollo wasn't seriously hurt. My son... Then relief changed to guilt. They were, all four of them, members of his command; Apollo deserved no special consideration.

He didn't speak until he was certain his voice was under complete control. "Who was responsible, Colonel?"

Tigh hadn't noticed the hesitation. He squirmed, not wanting to be the one to break the news. But he had to, and knew it. "None of them have regained consciousness yet, sir. And..."

"And what, Colonel?" The Commander's tone was sharp.

Tigh sighed. "Starbuck may never. He was dying when the emergency crews found him."

"I'm on my way. Out."

* * * * *

"Doctor Salik, you wanted to see me?" Commander Adama's voice was icily controlled.

Salik visibly pulled himself together, squaring his shoulders into something approaching erectness, then gave up. Adama was startled by how old the doctor suddenly seemed to be.

"I would like to report a failure of security here, Commander. Lieutenant Starbuck apparently just got up and walked out. He went down to Medical Records, and found Cassiopeia there -- alone." Salik's voice shook. "I... We...we sent her down there to keep her away from him, sir. He raped her and beat her half to death; he broke her arm doing it." Only then did he look up into Adama's compassionate gaze. "I thought he loved her."

The Commander laid a comforting hand on the distraught doctor's shoulder; Cassiopeia was a very special person to everyone who knew her. "So did I, Salik. What else?"

"Well, Lieutenant Boomer has a nice laser wound in the shoulder. He'll be on his feet in a few days, and flight-cleared in two sections, barring complications I really don't expect. He's awake, woke up just before you arrived. Do you want to talk to him?"

Adama blinked. "In a moment. What about Captain Apollo?"

"He's fine -- or, rather, he will be when he wakes up, and the sleep won't hurt him. He's got a badly sprained neck and a spectacular concussion, but he's not seriously hurt." Salik smiled, albeit wanly. "He'll have a headache bad enough to make him want to stay in bed, but he'll feel good enough otherwise that he'll feel guilty if he does. I expect to have to chain him to the bed."

Adama permitted himself a faint, brief smile; the doctor was quite right about his son's re-

sponse to what he considered coddling. But the thought reminded him of the information he still needed to hear. "And Starbuck? Come, Salik; this is like pulling teeth."

The doctor sighed. This was the kind of report he hated having to make. "Lieutenant Starbuck was shot through the body, Commander. Paye has him in surgery now, but holds little hope."

Adama bowed his head for a moment, but when he looked up, he was the impassive figure he always had to be. His gaze went past the doctor to some distance Salik couldn't see. "Let's go talk to Lieutenant Boomer."

* * * * *

Boomer was sitting up in bed, an impressively large bandage swathing his left shoulder, and plain agony on his face. He gave his report in a cold, remote monotone, keeping his emotions tightly chained. But when he got to the end, he choked. "Commander, I killed Starbuck! He was my best friend, and I...I killed him!"

Adama shot an inquiring glance at Doctor Salik, who shook his head solemnly.

"Boomer, listen to me." The Commander's voice held a resonant quality, and the younger man looked up at him with the same expression of worship that Adama so hated receiving from his junior officers. By Kobol's drifting sands, I am not a god! But most of the Fleet seemed quite anxious to promote him to that status. And here sits Boomer, who knows how human I am, has seen me grieve for things I cannot change, and he expects me to say something that will make everything that happened tonight somehow "all right." Would that I could, Boomer... Would that I could...

Adama momentarily entertained the image of Blue Squadron without Starbuck's brashness, and shuddered deep inside. And yet...both he and I always knew it might some day come to this. Not quite in this fashion, perhaps, but we are at war, still, and deaths are inevitable...

But why did it have to be Starbuck?

He took a deep breath and started again. "Boomer, you had no real choice in the matter. If you had not fired when you did, he would have killed Apollo; his experiences on the planet apparently left him quite insane. I think a swift death, at a friend's hands, was infinitely preferable to a lifetime in psychiatric confinement. You saved him from that, and I'm not surprised he was grateful. It's better this way."

Boomer didn't look convinced, and the Commander was about to continue -- Maybe if I repeat it often enough, I'll be able to believe it -- when a voice none of them had expected spoke from the doorway behind him.

"Father, he wasn't insane." Apollo stood there, his head bandaged, his neck encased in a stiff collar; he was clinging to the door-frame. "He was not insane," the Captain repeated distinctly. "He was being controlled."

Salik opened his mouth to chide his patient for getting out of bed without authorization, but when he heard the last sentence, he closed his mouth and listened.

"Cassiopeia and I were discussing it in the Officers' Club yesterday. She hadn't heard the details of the actual rescue. When she did, she put two and two together, and got four and a half." He wavered a little, and his father quickly helped him to the room's only chair. He sighed with relief, then continued as if nothing had happened.

"Cassiopeia says he was probably afraid to come home because he'd been conditioned to do something when he got here that would hurt us. He never struck me as being the martyr type." Apollo avoided looking at Boomer. "But I guess he couldn't think of any other way out."

The doctor nodded thoughtfully. "You know, that fits. He refused all food and drink; I had to feed him intravenously, and I had to sedate him to get the needle in. It fits..."

"Doctor?" An orderly stuck his head into the room.

Salik turned automatically. "Yes?"

"Cassiopeia's conscious, and we have two suspicious deaths."

Everyone in the chamber turned to him in amazement. "Well?" Salik demanded.

The man spread his hands in confusion. "Two techs, doctor, one of them a Cadet. One from Engineering, one from Fire Control. Both appear to have died from broken necks, but we're awaiting your official opinion. No witnesses; they were found at shift-change."

The Warriors stared at one another. "Starbuck?" Apollo whispered.

The Commander looked grim. "Apparently, he did not go directly to Medical Records." He went to the intercom. "Adama to Mikdan. Chief?"

"Aye, sir." The GALACTICA's Chief Engineer sounded a little harried.

"Check out all systems near the stations where your men were killed. We have reason..."

"Yes, sir," Mikdan interrupted. "At the fire control console, the vandal ripped out all the circuitry, and left it lying on the floor. At the other station, he left us a completely fused primary hyperdrive control centre."

Adama sighed. "How long will it take to effect repairs?"

"Repairs? Repairs? There's nothing left to repair!" the Sagittaran exclaimed. "We've got to replace everything! The reprogramming alone will take days."

Before the Commander could think of anything appropriate to say, the intercom beeped his signal. "Adama here."

"Tigh, sir. The Fleet is surrounded by another, smaller one, completely military in nature, converging on the GALACTICA."

"Order battle stations. Man all Vipers, but do not launch." Sirens wailed, and the corridor lights turned red as Adama switched back to Mikdan. "Chief, start repair and replacement procedures, and stand by for combat manoeuvres."

"Combat? Without the primary hyperdrive? We can't, sir! We're a sitting duck!"

"Chief, you're the best Engineer in two fleets. I'm confident you'll figure something out. Carry on."

"Well, I suppose I could..." Mikdan's voice faded as he turned away from the open com line.

Adama smiled faintly as he broke the connection. "Doctor, I'll be on the bridge. Please keep me advised."

Salik nodded.

Apollo followed his father out of Boomer's cubicle, and started to follow him out of Life Centre as well. The doctor grabbed him. "Oh, no, you don't, Captain. You're staying right here, where I can keep an eye on you."

The Captain in question cast an imploring glance at Adama, who had turned in the doorway to watch. The Commander considered for a moment. "Doctor, would it hurt him any to sit as an observer on the bridge? He shan't get near a Viper -- I'll guarantee that! But sitting on the bridge is a bit more, shall we say, emotionally satisfying?"

Apollo turned eagerly toward Salik, who obviously didn't approve. "You will remain seated at all times, Captain. No jumping about. You will sit as still as you can, and you will return here immediately when you are tired. Is that understood?"

"Anything you say, doctor," Apollo acquiesced meekly.

"Thank you, doctor." Adama's response was far more gracious.

Apollo would have run out of Life Centre, but he knew Salik would lock him up if he did.

* * * * *

Adama strode onto the bridge, and Tigh turned with undisguised relief to hand over command.

"Status, Colonel?"

"There are thirty-five enemy ships, Commander. They are of various types, but sensors agree they are all of approximately cruiser class. They are completely ignoring the Fleet."

"You received a damage report?"

"Yes, sir. What happened?"

"A little fifth column work, albeit involuntary. During his stay planetside, it seems Starbuck was conditioned to commit sabotage. He killed two techs, and injured Apollo, Boomer, and Cassiopeia."

"Busy, wasn't he?" Tigh commented drily.

"Very," Adama agreed.

"Father, I don't think Starbuck did any of that." Apollo spoke earnestly. "When we found them, he and Athena were alone, but her wrists were still bleeding. I believe their interrogator was with them up until practically the micron we arrived and stirred the place up. They wouldn't have had time to remove any equipment used in the conditioning. And besides, why should they have bothered? It wouldn't've meant anything to us until too late."

He paused for breath, and Tigh asked, "How did they accomplish it, then? I refuse to believe Starbuck cooperated in any way."

Adama smiled slowly. "Apollo's been reading some of my books. You think they have a telepath, don't you, son?"

"Yes, sir." Apollo swallowed nervously. Pronounced aloud, it sounds so far-fetched... "Starbuck is a much better shot than he gave evidence of. Boomer should be dead. I think he was fighting a losing battle with the telepath. He caused us some pain, but he managed to avoid killing any of us, although the telepath obviously wanted us dead."

The Colonel nodded. "It's plausible. He didn't want to come home because he knew what was coming, and was trying to prevent it. But why are those two techs dead, then?"

Apollo shrugged. "Insufficient emotional involvement...?"

Tigh nodded again. "Sound reasoning, Captain. But this is an intellectual exercise, isn't it? Starbuck's dead."

Apollo shuddered, fighting back tears, and was grateful for a timely interruption from Flight Officer Omega. "Incoming communication, Commander."

"Visual, please."

"Yes, sir."

All eyes turned toward the viewing screen, although Apollo stayed out of the pick-up's range. The face that appeared was familiar to all of them. "Greetings, Commander Adama."

"Commandant Leiter." Adama granted him the barest courtesy.

"I call," the Terran said, "to offer surrender terms."

"I would be most pleased to accept your surrender, Commandant."

"Ah, such confidence! Have you not discovered my little time bomb?"

"If you are referring to the young Lieutenant, he's dead."

Leiter's voice dripped pity, and Apollo ground his teeth. "How very unfortunate. Please extend my condolences to his family, Commander."

"Unnecessary," Adama replied briefly. "He had none. I will still accept your surrender."

The Terran shook his head. "No, Commander. The Eastern Alliance has decided that we require your...battlestar, I believe you call her. Your technology will make our empire -- excuse me, our hegemony -- much more secure. The running dogs of the Western Coalition are growing troublesome, and we desire a more certain method of capture and detention.

"Your battlestar would make us invincible." Leiter warmed to his subject, and Adama let him talk uninterrupted. "Come, Commander. Without fire control or hyperdrive, how can you fight us?"

"You have been misinformed, Commandant," Adama said mildly. "I have both fire control and hyperdrive. No battlestar in the millennia-long history of our Fleet has ever surrendered, and only a Cylon base star has ever successfully destroyed one. And you cannot even imagine the power of a Cylon base star."

Leiter was listening to something off-camera. The intent Colonials couldn't hear what was being said, even though Omega, without instruction, stepped up the gain.

"No, Commander," the Terran said as he turned his attention back to his screen. "I am reliably informed that you cannot possibly have fire control or hyperdrive."

"Your telepath, no doubt." Adama appeared unconcerned, and Leiter blinked at the power play. "But he had contact only through Lieutenant Starbuck. And you don't know my Chief Engineer. Would you care to reconsider?"

The Terran snarled wordlessly, and broke off communication. A blast rocked the bridge slightly, and Adama calmly depressed an intercom button. "Launch all Vipers. Concentrate your attack on the support squadron. If possible, leave the command ship alone."

Like a swarm of angry bees, the Colonial strike force swooped down on their unsuspecting foe, eager to avenge and punish.

Omega, watching the battle on a scanner, grimaced. "We're doing quite well, Commander, but I can tell that the squadron leaders and seconds are on sick call."

"How?" Adama came to look over his shoulder; he was always interested in other people's observations.

"There's a barely noticeable lack of peak efficiency, sir. I mean no slight to Jolly or any of the others, but there are few Warriors in a class with our squadron officers."

Yeah... We were one Hades of a team, Starbuck. Maybe we can train Vi to fly a Viper, but... But who am I going to play triad with now...? Apollo shuddered, and tried not to think further about Starbuck's now-permanent absence.

"Commander!" Tigh's voice roused everyone from their melancholy reveries. "The command ship is breaking away, and heading for the surface. His fleet has been effectively destroyed, and he's running for cover."

"Send Blue Squadron Leader and his wing to follow them down and mark where they land. I want Leiter alive, and that will be much easier planetside." Adama's voice was as level and measured as ever, and again, all his subordinate officers marvelled at their leader's seemingly superhuman control.

Tigh smiled coldly. "May I suggest that Blue Leader cripple the ship when it lands, so they cannot escape?"

The Commander's answering smile was glacial. "Excellent suggestion, Colonel. Implement it at once. Recall all other Vipers. The pilots will be going planetside immediately, with the marines, to search for survivors."

Apollo stared at his father, amazed.

PART III

The next morning was a memorable one for all concerned. The first detachment of Warriors returned to the GALACTICA, reporting that the Eastern Alliance forces had taken cover in a cave of undetermined dimensions near their landing site. It would take a lot of effort to extricate them.

Apollo, Boomer, and Cassiopeia ate breakfast together in the woman's cubicle in Life Centre, awaiting news. Apollo had a splitting headache and moved cautiously. Boomer's arm was beginning to heal, and therefore had begun to itch, making him jumpy.

Cassiopeia only picked at her food, her eyes shadowed with pain that was only partly physical. She, too, had an arm in a cast, but ignored it. She'd said little since regaining consciousness; a bare report of what had happened was all either Salik or Paye could get out of her. She hadn't smiled once, either. Both Apollo and Boomer attempted to suppress their own grief to help her recover from hers, but nothing seemed to work.

The silence was becoming awkward by the time Salik let himself into the room. His beaming smile was distinctly out of place in that grief-filled setting, but he didn't seem aware that anything was amiss. "Good morning, all. How are my patients today?"

They shrugged listlessly, Boomer moving with extreme care. The doctor looked intently at each of them in turn, trying to judge their states of mind. "Well, I have some good news for you. It should cheer you all up."

"Oh, really?" Boomer asked bitterly. "Has the planet turned out to be Earth?"

"Nooo," the medical officer drawled. "But you may find this almost as good." He took a deep breath, and spaced the words out so there would be no mistake about what he was saying. "Lieutenant...Starbuck...is...alive!"

Three pairs of eyes flew to meet his. For a long time, the only sound in the room was that of three hearts thudding in shock.

Salik nodded. "He was so badly hurt," he went on to explain, "that Doctor Paye was uncertain whether he'd survive the surgery, so we just let you continue believing he was dead. If he did die, it couldn't hurt any of you any more, and if he lived... Well?" He looked from one to another, waiting for a reaction. Eventually, he got one.

"Starbuck's alive?" Boomer whispered in disbelief.

"He's not conscious yet; it's only been a few centars since Paye finished with him. But it appears he will recover completely. It will take a while..."

Boomer stood up slowly, still having a little difficulty dealing with the bombshell. He glanced at Apollo, who understood, and joined him at the door.

"Cassiopeia," the Captain said softly, "do you want to come with us?"

She shook her head disinterestedly. "No, I don't think so. I'm tired; I think I'll take a nap."

Apollo and Salik exchanged worried glances. The Captain was about to speak when Boomer interrupted. "Where is he?"

"In Recovery. Just ask the med tech at the desk."

"Thanks." Boomer vanished out the door.

Apollo coughed. "Doctor, would you join us? We'll be back later, Cassiopeia." He frowned when she didn't answer.

When they were out in the corridor, with the door shut firmly behind them, Salik stopped to study Apollo's face. "You wanted to say something, Captain." It was a statement, not a question.

Apollo gestured vehemently. "Yes, I do. But I don't know how to say it..."

"You're doing quite poorly at the moment." The doctor grinned. "What's the matter?"

"Cassiopeia."

Salik blinked in surprise. "What about her?"

"Doctor!" Apollo was amazed. "She's in love with Starbuck -- and I'm pretty sure it's mutual. He's never maintained a relationship like this for so long before in his life. So why doesn't she want to see him now?"

The medical officer stared at him as though he were something that had just crawled out from underneath a rock. "After everything she's suffered at his hands, you have to ask that? It's going to take time to heal -- and I don't mean her arm!"

"But that wasn't Starbuck at all!" He went on to explain his theory.

Salik just shook his head. "That's just a theory, Captain. Now, this is an intensive care ward, and we expect quiet -- at all times."

Apollo looked up, and found they had arrived. A most peculiar expression crossed his face. For a moment, joy, a gentle sadness, and more than a little honest dread were all visible to the astonished doctor. But the Captain forgot all about Salik as he opened the door and looked in.

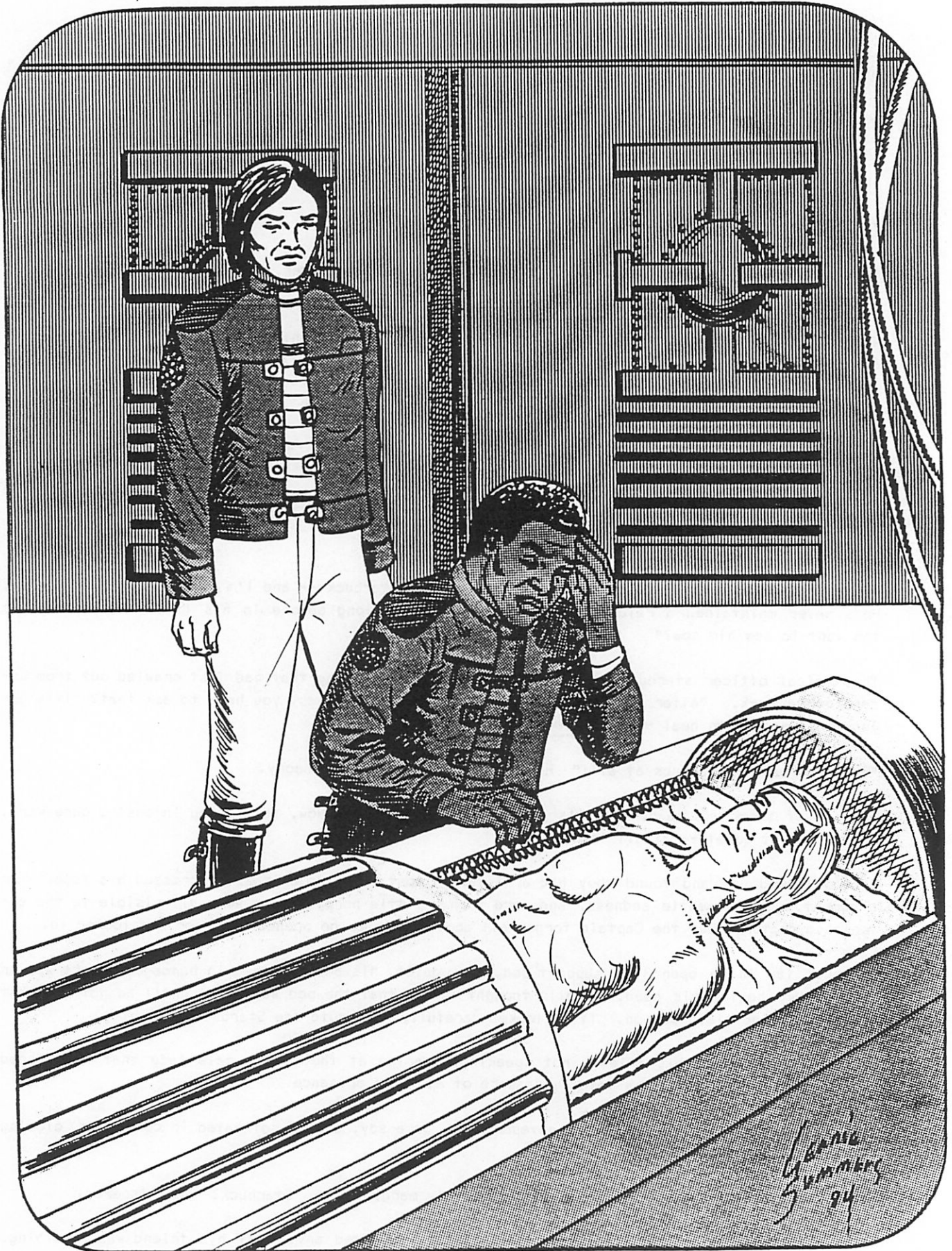
Starbuck lay in an open life support pod, very quiet, his body swathed in bandages; there was an oxygen pump beside his head. Apollo thought it odd that the pod was open, until he noticed that the sterilizing field was on. If he looked carefully, he could see Starbuck breathing.

Boomer knelt beside his friend, not speaking, staring at the still, pale face that was turned slightly toward him. He was totally unaware of Apollo's presence.

The Captain suddenly felt like an eavesdropper, or a spy, and he retreated in confusion, closing the door silently behind him.

Boomer noticed Apollo's arrival and departure only marginally. "Starbuck?" he whispered.

There was no response, of course; he hadn't truly expected any. But his friend was breathing, and that was response enough.



Suddenly, there were tears in Boomer's eyes, and great wracking sobs shook his body. Believing himself guilty of what amounted to fratricide, he hadn't permitted himself the luxury of tears. But now, they came, unrestrained -- tears of relief and release.

Starbuck was alive.

* * * * *

"Colonel, have you any suggestions?"

Colonel Yin, head of the GALACTICA's marine division, steepled his fingers and looked inscrutable -- something at which he was very good indeed. "Commander, land assault is my speciality. To take the embattled occupants of a natural cave alive -- this poses something of a challenge. I suggest we gas them out."

"It does seem singularly appropriate, considering their favourite capture method," Colonel Tigh commented drily.

"But the extent of the cavern system is unknown. If it goes back too far, they can simply retreat and avoid the gas." Lieutenant Colonel Angis of the civilian Security detachment felt somewhat out of place in a military briefing, and obligated to justify his presence.

Yin glanced at him. "The GALACTICA's guns can bring down the cave."

Adama sighed and shook his head. "We don't have fire control, remember. The computer was destroyed last night."

"Destroyed!" Yin glared at Angis, who squirmed. "Security! Do you wonder, Commander, that my men even sleep armed?"

"Truly, Colonel? How uncomfortable." Adama put a firm damper on their rivalry. "It was an act of sabotage committed by a conditioned Viper pilot who was their prisoner for several days."

"Ah, yes, young Lieutenant Starbuck. Is he recovering satisfactorily?"

Yin wasn't being sarcastic; he was quite sincere. Tigh swallowed his personal dislike of the marine officer to answer politely. "Yes; he's expected to return to duty, although the doctors aren't certain when."

"Could Vipers block their retreat?" Apollo had been listening at the door, and took advantage of the break in conversation to enter. Exhausted, he dropped heavily into the one empty chair; that jarred his skull, making him wince.

Adama glared at him in exasperation. "I told you to call a transport. The GALACTICA's too big for you to go running around on foot in your condition."

"I'm all right," the Captain replied. "I was with Starbuck."

The Commander's expression softened. "Is he awake yet?"

His son shook his head, and immediately regretted the action. "Not when I left. Boomer stayed with him."

"Commander?"

Adama turned to his marine commander, his concern for Starbuck temporarily pushed aside by military necessity. "Yes, Colonel?"

"I do not believe Vipers can handle this assignment with sufficient delicacy, sir," Yin explained carefully. "A team will probably have to be landed -- a good demolition squad, advised by a competent planetologist."

The Commander nodded. "How soon can you implement it?"

Yin grinned wolfishly, and Apollo, seeing that expression, shivered. "Oh, about six centars."

Adama smiled at the enthusiasm, and nodded again. "Do it, then."

"Yes, sir!"

* * * * *

Boomer maintained his vigil in the ICU for more centars than he cared to estimate. He didn't notice the passage of time until he was drawn out of his preoccupation by the arrival of a med tech with a lunch tray. "Why, thanks, Cheryl! I didn't notice the time."

"You're welcome," she smiled, understanding. She moved about unobtrusively, checking her patient without bothering Boomer at all. He never noticed when she left. He ate slowly, hardly tasting his food, and almost dropped his glass when Starbuck moved.

The injured man moaned and opened fogged eyes. He couldn't see very well, but the shape beside the bed was comfortingly familiar. "B...Boomer...?" he croaked.

"Lords of Kobol!" Boomer couldn't think of anything more coherent to say.

"Squared," Starbuck agreed wearily. He blinked, and his vision cleared. His roving glance took in all the life support equipment, and he grimaced. "I guess you're a lousy shot," he said quietly. "I'm still alive." His voice was weak and rusty, but his bitterness was clear. "I was countin' on you, buddy."

Boomer stared at him. "You... You wanted me to shoot you?" he gasped.

"I wanted you to kill me!" Starbuck flared, then winced as a spasm of pain tore through him. When he continued, his voice was very low. "After what I've done...? What else could I want from my oldest friend?" Boomer looked away from the agony he saw in the other man's eyes, but he couldn't shut his ears. "Boomer...? Does...does Cassie hate me?"

"I...I don't know. She doesn't talk... She just lies there. She's badly hurt..." He stopped talking when he saw Starbuck close his eyes. "Why? Why did you...do all that?"

His friend sighed in exhaustion. "I don't know how to explain it."

"Just tell me. We know you were a prisoner for over two days, and you didn't want to come home. Did you know you broke Greenbean's jaw?"

"I did? I...I don't remember," Starbuck said in a small voice.

"Oh, that's probably because I decked you right afterwards," Boomer told him, grinning slightly; it was the first time in their long friendship that Boomer had ever won a fight with Starbuck

without resorting to nerve-holds.

Starbuck reacted to the triumphant tone with a challenging expression. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. We brought you home, and you proceeded to go crazy every time someone touched you, tried to hide from all your friends. Even Cassie. Doctor Salik banned all visitors, and had her transferred out."

"To MedRec," Starbuck supplied, his tone rather hollow.

"Right. So what happened?"

Slowly, painfully, with many pauses to bring his voice under sufficient control, Starbuck told Boomer of his two days in captivity. At the end of his recital, he lay exhausted, his eyes closed, panting.

"You take a nap," his friend told him. "I'm going to explain all this to Cassie -- she doesn't understand. I'll be back in a little while."

* * * * *

The assault on the planet the Colonials had named Hades was a little more complicated than Yin had made it seem, but the demolition team led by Chief Planetologist Major Raksh succeeded in planting their charges. The demolitions officer, Captain Slean, was quite confident. "Commander, you don't have to worry about a thing. It'll work perfectly. I can time it to the micron."

"Good work, Captain. Thank you very much. Stand by." Adama, on the bridge, switched com circuits.

"Yin," came the laconic response.

"Go."

"Yes, sir!"

* * * * *

Down on the planet's surface, four platoons of marines, their ranks swelled by pilot volunteers, approached the caves. When they were in position, Yin keyed his communicator. "Raksh?"

"Here."

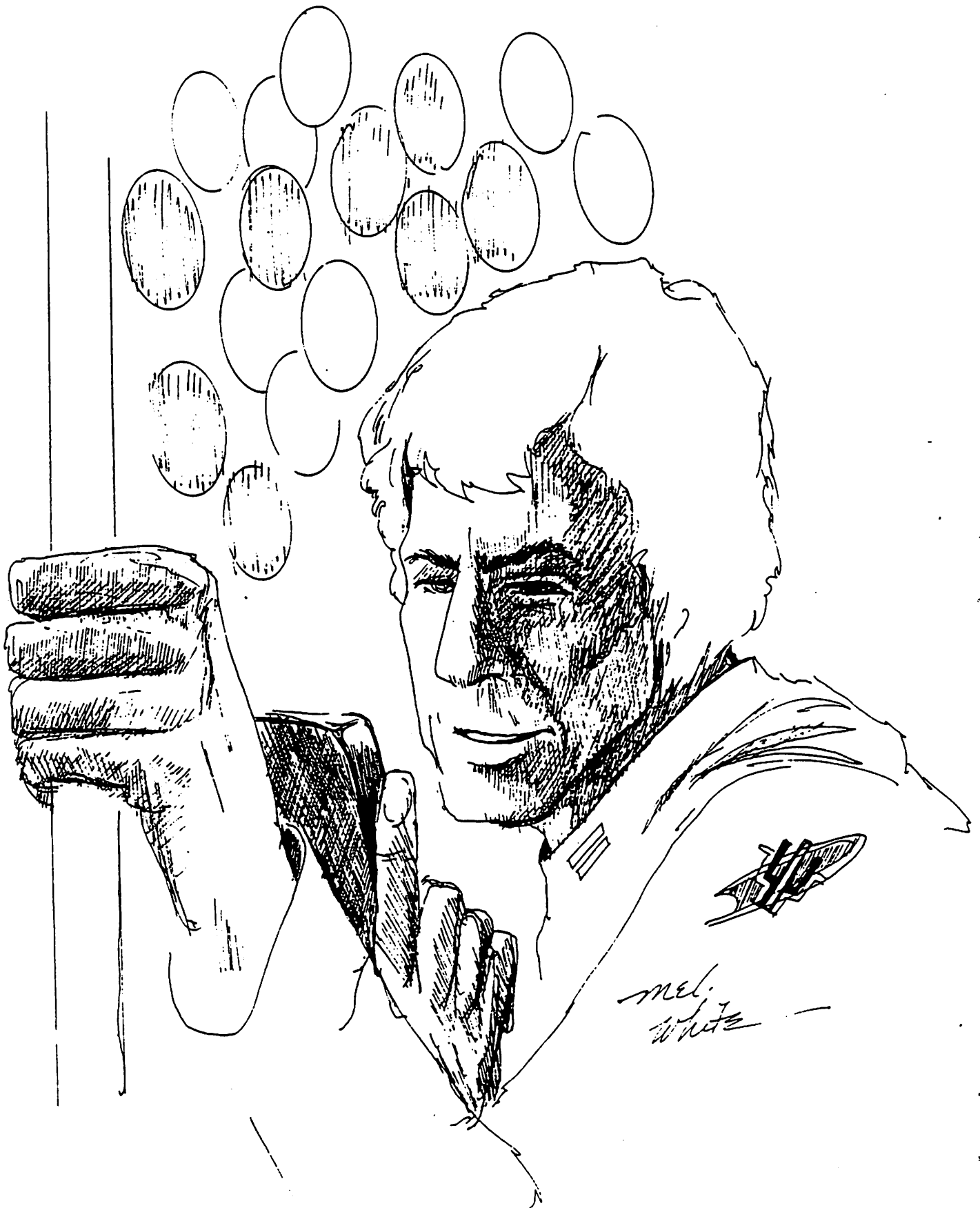
"Yin. Blow it."

"Affirmative."

There was a moment of strained silence, during which most of the Colonial Warriors checked their breathing gear again. Then half the mountain seemed to collapse in on itself, and the ground beneath them rumbled and shook.

"Going in! By platoon -- go!"

The first wave entered the cave just as a huge billow of rock dust rolled out. Safe in their breathers, the Warriors ignored it, and began their advance.



* * * * *

"No!" The anguished scream was torn from Starbuck's throat.

Boomer, only a few metres down the corridor, dashed back, to find his friend struggling to get out of the life pod. "Starbuck! Starbuck, what's wrong?" he demanded, forcing his way past a bewildered med tech.

"No! No! Boomer, he's after me again! Boomer!" He screamed again, thrashing so violently that the black Warrior was afraid he would hurt himself.

"Fight him, Starbuck! You've got the strength this time; he didn't drug you. Fight!" Boomer stood over his friend and forcibly held him still in the pod. Then he looked over his shoulder at the med techs in the doorway. They stared, completely at a loss to understand what was happening. "Get out!" he snarled at them. "This is a battle, and you can't help him fight it."

Starbuck's teeth were clenched, and his eyes screwed shut, eloquent of the effort he was putting into his struggle. "No...no...I won't! Not again! Not again!" He screamed, clutching helplessly at Boomer, and his hand struck the laser holstered at his friend's side. He pulled it free in one easy motion and turned it on himself.

Boomer gave a cry of horror and wrested the weapon away, throwing it across the room.

"I can't hold him off forever," Starbuck moaned. "He wants me to kill the Commander...and I will! I will! Please, Boomer! You started the job; let me finish it. Give me the gun back! Please!"

Boomer had never seen his friend in such complete despair. "No," he said firmly. "The assault must've begun, and this is a desperate gamble. It won't last long. Fight!"

Suddenly, Starbuck relaxed, and drew a long, sobbing breath. Then he coughed, and licked blood from his lips. "Boomer?" he whispered, so faintly that the other man had to lean close to hear him.

"Yes?"

"The Master... His name is Jiesser. When you kill him for me...do...it...slowly..." Starbuck fainted, haemorrhaging again.

Boomer couldn't even tell if he was still breathing. He hit the panic button on the life pod, stepping away as medics poured into the chamber, Doctor Paye in the lead.

They shoved him out of the room as they went to work on their patient. Bewildered, stunned by what he had heard and seen, he retrieved his laser and went to see Cassiopeia. But she was asleep, and the orderly wouldn't let him wake her.

Boomer stood outside her door, unsure where he could go, certain only that he couldn't return to his own little cell in Life Centre. He had to do something. His arm ached, and he rubbed the bandage absently. Then he turned and headed for the bridge.

* * * * *

Colonel Tigh and Flight Officer Omega monitored the battle in the cave by audio, which they found singularly unsatisfying. Disjointed phrases could sometimes be heard over the hubbub of battle.

"There's another one! Get 'im!"

"Frakkin' bastard got me!"

"The gas isn't working! Ceiling's too high!"

"...Misha...help..."

"So fight, damn you!"

"Platoon C, turn and circle around that nest of gunners. Get 'em from behind. We'll keep you covered."

Boomer entered the battle-ready bridge, cradling his throbbing arm against his chest. Apollo greeted him with a smile and a gesture for silence that they both knew was unnecessary. The Lieutenant joined his Captain at his vantage point, and they watched the screen together for several centons. Then Apollo stole a glance at the grim-faced Warrior beside him and asked him what was wrong.

Boomer took a deep breath and explained what had happened in Life Centre. He included a brief but descriptive summary of Starbuck's captivity. The Captain's fists clenched in impotent fury. "What can we do?" he asked hoarsely. Lords of Kobol! Athena went through that, too? My best friend, and my sister...

Boomer shrugged his right shoulder with studied nonchalance. "He said to kill Jiesser -- slowly."

Apollo studied the screen intently, not really seeing the shadowy heat-images. The Colonial forces were advancing as predicted, and everything would be over soon. "He may be dead already," he observed.

"Then we'll have to prove it to Starbuck. And he'll be hard to convince. If we don't, he'll suicide. He's already tried twice."

"Twice!" Tigh had been listening. "Twice?"

Boomer nodded miserably. "When I shot him, he was trying to die." He couldn't hide the guilt he still felt.

Apollo made his decision without any conscious thought. "Commander?"

"Yes, Captain?" Adama replied without taking his attention away from the telemetry transmission.

"We need a positive identification of someone named Jiesser, if he's already dead. And we need to make him dead if he isn't."

The Commander whirled, shocked to his soul. He had never heard such cold-bloodedness from his son before. Other members of his command had expressed similar sentiments in the past, but Apollo never had. "Why?" he demanded sharply.

The Captain looked his father squarely in the eye and explained Starbuck's attitude and condition. "Besides," he concluded softly, "it might help Athena."

Adama regarded the two pilots so calmly asking for blood revenge, then turned to Tigh. "Opinion, Colonel?"

Tigh considered for a moment, and when he answered, did so slowly. "It might not help Athena. We don't know anything about this procedure; it's still hypothetical, and if we capture him, we might learn something from him. But we'd need him alive."

Boomer didn't raise his voice, but his words penetrated. "Starbuck knows more about this than any of us, and he said to kill Jiesser. 'The Master,' he called him."

The Commander turned away, considering for a moment. Then he keyed the command circuit. "Colonel Yin?"

There was a brief crackle that could have been either static or gun-fire. Then the marine Colonel's voice came through loud and clear. "Yin here."

"Colonel, I have a request."

"Commander, I am in the middle of a battle!" He sounded somewhat exasperated.

"Yes, I know, although I believe you are actually about to start your mop-up operation."

"Mop-up?" Yin sounded amazed. "Mop-up? We're stymied, Commander! They didn't panic -- they retreated in good order. True, they are cornered now, up against the slide. We will get them out eventually. But it will take time."

Adama sighed. "I need a positive identification of one Jiesser, other particulars unknown. He is a telepath. When you've firmly identified his body, get legal proof of some kind -- holographs, signed depositions... You know the drill. You'll have to convince a hostile witness."

"Aye, sir. Out." The Colonel turned to his aide, a young and eager Lieutenant named Arian. "The Old Man wants an ident -- a legal, loophole-proof ident of a battle casualty!"

"Yes, sir. Who?" Arian grinned like a puppy, asking his question with the perfect confidence that sometimes made Yin feel every one of his nearly sixty yahrens.

"The telepath. His name is Jiesser."

"I'll get right on it, sir." Arian left, retreating from the front cautiously, trying not to draw fire. He succeeded, and went back to the prisoner holding area.

There were nearly a dozen prisoners, mostly faceless private soldiers. But one obviously held more rank, and the Lieutenant tried to sound nonchalant as he struck up a conversation.

* * * * *

Boomer left the bridge as quietly as he had arrived. Only Apollo saw him go, and he was far too preoccupied with the battle to try to stop him.

The fighting in the cave progressed nicely, with Yin's men systematically eliminating all resistance. Those who surrendered were disarmed and taken behind the lines, where they were kept under guard by walking Colonial wounded.

The marine Colonel had every confidence that the small pocket of hold-outs would either surrender or be wiped out in short order. He was about to leave his command post, a small alcove near the fighting, when something struck him a stunning blow on the skull.

As he sank helplessly to the ground, his only thought was that the Eastern Alliance forces were bringing the cave down on his men. Then he knew nothing.

Jiesser stood over the unconscious marine, panting heavily. He hadn't been at all certain of his ability to hold the stranger deaf-to-me for any length of time, but had apparently held him just long enough.

He bent and removed the Warrior's laser, then turned and gestured toward the crack in the wall through which he had come. His commander stepped through, and imperiously took the weapon.

"Now what?" Commandant Leiter asked, dependant upon Jiesser's superior scouting abilities.

"The entrance is about two hundred metres that way." The telepath gestured. "But there are a lot of Colonials there. This one" -- he nudged Yin's body with one foot -- "ordered all his wounded and his prisoners to a position near the entrance."

Leiter smiled grimly. "Then we'll first have to sneak past them, won't we?"

"Unless you have a better idea," Jiesser agreed.

* * * * *

Boomer descended several levels to the Viper launch decks. He sauntered past the few techs who were around. With most of the pilots planetside, getting shot at, there was no one about to challenge him as he climbed into his fighter.

As he thumbed the turbos to life, a small indicator flashed on the bridge. But no one saw it.

* * * * *

The Viper landed alongside several huge troop transports, and her pilot jogged toward the cave.

A fire-fight was going on at the far end of the vast cavern; a circle of prisoners stood just inside the entrance, guarded by three marines and Bojay. The Colonials were all wounded, although none of them seriously.

"Boomer!" Bojay was amazed. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to pick up a particular person, or proof of his death -- their telepath, Jiesser. Have you got him?"

A fourth marine turned. "No, we haven't found him yet. Who're you?"

"Lieutenant Boomer, Viper pilot, Blue Squadron. And you?"

The marine held out his hand. "I'm Lieutenant Arian, Colonel Yin's aide. I'm looking for him, too, as the Commander ordered."

"You want some help?" The pilot grinned.

The young Lieutenant was somewhat taken aback by that ready smile, and didn't answer immediately. "Well, sure, I guess so," he finally murmured. "Come on, let's go check the bodies."

Boomer made a face. "He's not here, then?" He gestured at the corralled prisoners.

Arian shook his head. "No, not within the limits of error. I don't think, somehow, that he'd passively allow himself to be captured, not by Starbuck's shipmates."

The other man nodded grimly. "So I guess we search the bodies."

* * * * *

The cave was tremendous. Boomer speculated that it was almost half the size of the GALACTICA's Flight Deck Alpha. Once, of course, it had been even larger, but the blast from Raksh's squad had eliminated a good part of it.

The Eastern Alliance forces had retreated across the floor of the cave, and the Colonials had to step over numerous bodies to continue their advance. No one had yet had time to drag those bodies out of the way; behind the Colonial lines, the floor was littered with corpses wearing olive uniforms. There were also some wearing Colonial brown, but Boomer ignored them; he didn't want to see any of his friends there. Besides, he was looking for Jiesser.

He and his marine companion moved silently among the dead, like medieval peasants looting a field after a battle. They gradually made their way toward a pile of bodies lying near a naturally fortified alcove close to the fighting.

Arian pointed to it with his chin. "See that?" he asked rhetorically. "That little crack there leads all the way to the front. Maybe even farther. It also widens out. They had it first, then we took it."

The marine's recital was bald, but Boomer could see a good many earth-coloured marine uniforms mixed in the heap of corpses. "It must've been quite a fight," he allowed.

"It certainly was."

The two men whirled at the sound of a third voice.

Commandant Leiter stood behind them, holding a weapon in each hand. One of them, Boomer noted bleakly, was a captured Colonial laser. "I would appreciate it if neither of you moved," the Commandant added in a conversational tone. "Ah, Lieutenant Boomer, so nice to see you again."

"Too bad it isn't mutual," he snarled.

"Ah, ah, ah!" Leiter chided. "Such rudeness! One should always maintain the appearances, Lieutenant."

"I'd love to arrange for the appearance of your corpse!" Boomer offered.

"Such willingness to please! Truly amazing. Tell me, Jiesser, why am I not so blindly served as Adama?"

The telepath stepped into view. "I do not know, Commandant. Perhaps it is because you are a winner, and from all reports, this Adama commands a fleet of fugitives. They have lost, and they are running, like beasts before flame."

Both Colonials were furious, but each refused to give the Eastern Alliance officers the satisfaction of knowing it. Boomer seethed. Here was his intended prisoner, alive and quite well, and about to -- oh, unspeakable! -- escape.

Moving efficiently, Jiesser bound both Warriors, dragging their jackets down around their wrists and fastening them together with their gunbelts, making wriggling free nearly impossible. He gave no consideration to Boomer's wounded arm.

"Well, sir, now we have hostages." The telepath plainly didn't know what his leader had planned. There was a distinct note of interrogation in his simple statement.

Leiter looked at Boomer for a long moment; the Warrior stared back defiantly. "I want to talk to your Commander Adama. How might it be arranged?"

Neither of his captives said anything.

The Commandant sighed. "Jiesser." It was an order.

Boomer tensed helplessly. After everything Starbuck had told him, he had a pretty good idea what was about to happen. It frightened him.

The telepath took one look at him and shook his head. "He is on guard, Commandant, and I have no dominizine with me."

"Then I guess we bull our way through."

The Colonials exchanged puzzled glances. Bull our way... They understood the language, but every culture developed its own idioms, and neither of them understood this particular one.

But they quickly discovered what the phrase meant.

Each man was roughly hustled toward the exit by one of the Eastern Alliance officers. They were behind the lines, and went unnoticed until they had almost passed the prisoner corral.

Bojay was bored. He'd been shot in the leg, and while it wasn't serious, the wound was painful enough that he didn't want to walk around any more than was absolutely necessary. He tried watching the battle while seated in a strategic position between the prisoners and the cave exit, but it was hard to see the progress of the fighting; nearly all he could make out was the bright flashing of laser bolts. There was no other light, and shadows danced on the cavern walls.

He yawned, and turned away from the light show. The flashes were beginning to give him a headache. Then he saw a familiar figure. "Boomer!" he shouted in delight.

He suddenly realized his friend's arms were positioned most oddly, and his hand strayed nearer to his laser.

"No, Lieutenant," a quiet voice warned.

Bojay froze.

"We wish to do no more unnecessary killing. Do not force my hand." Leiter's voice was icily calm.

Bojay believed him. "What do you want?" He hoped he could keep his own voice steady.

"I want only to talk to Commander Adama."

The former PEGASUS Warrior squinted in the darkness. "He's not here." Boomer grinned in



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approval.

"I know that he is not here," the Eastern Alliance commander continued patiently. "I want a communicator on your command frequency." He aimed the weapon in his right hand unwaveringly at Boomer's head, and Bojay swallowed nervously.

"I don't have one," he temporized, his voice shaking.

"Where can we get one?" The man's hissing tone was menacing, and the gun barrel moved meaningfully closer to his captive's head.

"I don't..."

"Lieutenant!" Leiter snapped. "I would as soon not kill one hostage so early, but if you force my hand..."

Bojay looked helplessly at Boomer, who gave a tiny shrug with his right shoulder. The other man slumped in surrender. "I'll get it," he said tonelessly, and struggled painfully to his feet.

"Jiesser, go with him."

"Yes, Commandant."

Bojay limped slowly to a pile of weapons and equipment, kneeling beside it to retrieve something off the ground. Jiesser followed, carefully watching every move he made. He saw the Colonial's finger surreptitiously press a small button on the communicator, and he reacted at once, slugging the wounded Warrior on the back of the skull with his gun barrel. His victim fell without a sound.

Jiesser stood over the motionless body for a moment, then picked up the communicator and brought it to his commander. Leiter inspected it curiously. It fit no pattern he knew, and he was at a loss to know how to operate it. Rather than lose face before his prisoners, he gestured with his gun at Arian. "How does this thing work?"

The marine didn't reply, but continued to stare evenly at his captor.

"You will tell me, or I will kill you now." The Commandant was swiftly losing all patience.

Arian shrugged. "You'll kill us eventually, anyway. This farce has gone on long enough."

"Arian," Boomer interrupted in warning. The marine shot him a dubious glance, and the pilot turned his attention to Leiter. "You press the blue button to talk; release it to listen," he explained expressionlessly.

The Commandant followed his instructions. Nothing happened.

"Try pressing the recessed black button on the side."

The monotonous hum of a carrier wave answered the attempt. "Commander Adama, can you hear me?"

"One moment, please." Moiran, Athena's replacement on the bridge, swivelled her chair around. "Commander?"

"Yes, Ensign? What is it?"

"A message from the planet, sir. No identification, but it's on one of our command frequencies." Her tone betrayed her curiosity.

Adama, too, was intrigued. "Put it on audio, Ensign."

"Yes, sir." She returned to her board, and quickly switched the necessary circuits. "The Commander is on line."

"Commander Adama?" The voice sent a chill down his listeners' spines. "This is Commandant Leiter of the Eastern Alliance. You seem to have bested me once again."

"I am still willing to accept your surrender, Commandant."

There was something mocking in the other man's voice as he continued. "Oh, no, Commander. You are going to assist in my escape -- mine, and my aide's."

"Now, why would I do that?" Stall as long as you can...

"Because," Leiter answered almost gleefully, "I hold two of your officers as hostage. I will kill one and cripple the other if you do not cooperate."

Apollo stiffened. Half of the landing party was composed of his own men. Which of his friends had fallen into Eastern Alliance hands this time?

The Commander, too, was uneasy, although it wasn't evident to those around him. "Who are your prisoners?" he demanded flatly.

"The first is a young marine, Lieutenant Arian," the Commandant said, pausing to let his words sink into his listeners' minds.

"Colonel Yin's aide," Tigh supplied quickly.

"And?"

"One I have reason to know personally -- Lieutenant Boomer, who has enjoyed my hospitality once before."

"Boomer?" Adama wheeled about in amazement, expecting to see that Warrior standing behind him. Instead, he saw only a puzzled Apollo. But he recovered quickly. "What is your proposed course of action?" His voice was completely serene; he might have been discussing the weather.

"I want a ship I can return home in. No pursuit, no traps. I will keep the Lieutenant here as my pilot. When I get home... Excuse me, Jiesser. When we get home, I will release him."

Apollo was horrified. If his father agreed, Boomer would never be able to find the Fleet again; his friend would surely be lost. But if the Commander didn't agree, both Boomer and Arian were doomed.

Adama showed no outward sign of agitation, although he understood the ramifications of that offer quite as well as his son. But then, he'd had generations of practice at self-control. "I want to talk to Lieutenant Boomer."

Leiter grinned, and shoved the communicator in front of his prisoner.

"Lieutenant, what are you doing planetside?" The Commander's voice was harsh.

The man he addressed automatically brought himself to attention. "I was looking for someone, sir."

"And did you find him?" Adama asked in a completely different tone.

"Yes, sir. He's here with me now."

The Commander didn't reply immediately. Boomer had gone looking for Jiesser for Starbuck's sake; that much was clear. He'd apparently found him, too, but was helpless to do anything about it at the moment. "Identification positive?" he asked at last.

"Yes, sir." Boomer flexed his right arm, trying not to disturb the left one; it hurt too much. He gathered himself for a spring, waiting for the right moment. A shadow detached itself from the darkness behind him and drifted to a stop behind Arian; soon, the marine's hands were free, too. Bojay slipped back into the shadows.

"Commander Adama, I am not bluffing," Leiter snapped, glancing at Jiesser, who stood on the other side of their prisoners. "My aide and I have every intention of..."

Boomer stopped listening. There was nothing Leiter could say that would change anything now. Arian locked eyes with him and nodded fractionally.

"Commandant Leiter, I am afraid I must insist..."

The Eastern Alliance officer opened his mouth to reply, and Arian leaped. His weight knocked Leiter sprawling, and the communicator flew several metres away. The two men rolled on the ground, wrestling for Leiter's gun.

At the same instant, Boomer leaped at Jiesser, wrapping his jacket around the other's throat, trying to choke him into submission. The Warrior's teeth were clenched in a silent snarl. He totally ignored the telepath's attempts to bring his own weapon to bear on him. Bojay limped back out of the darkness in time to knock the gun aside. Boomer never noticed; the Eastern Alliance officer was weakening.

But Boomer had only one hand working at full efficiency, and Jiesser suddenly remembered that. As they struggled, he struck the Colonial hard, directly on the wound.

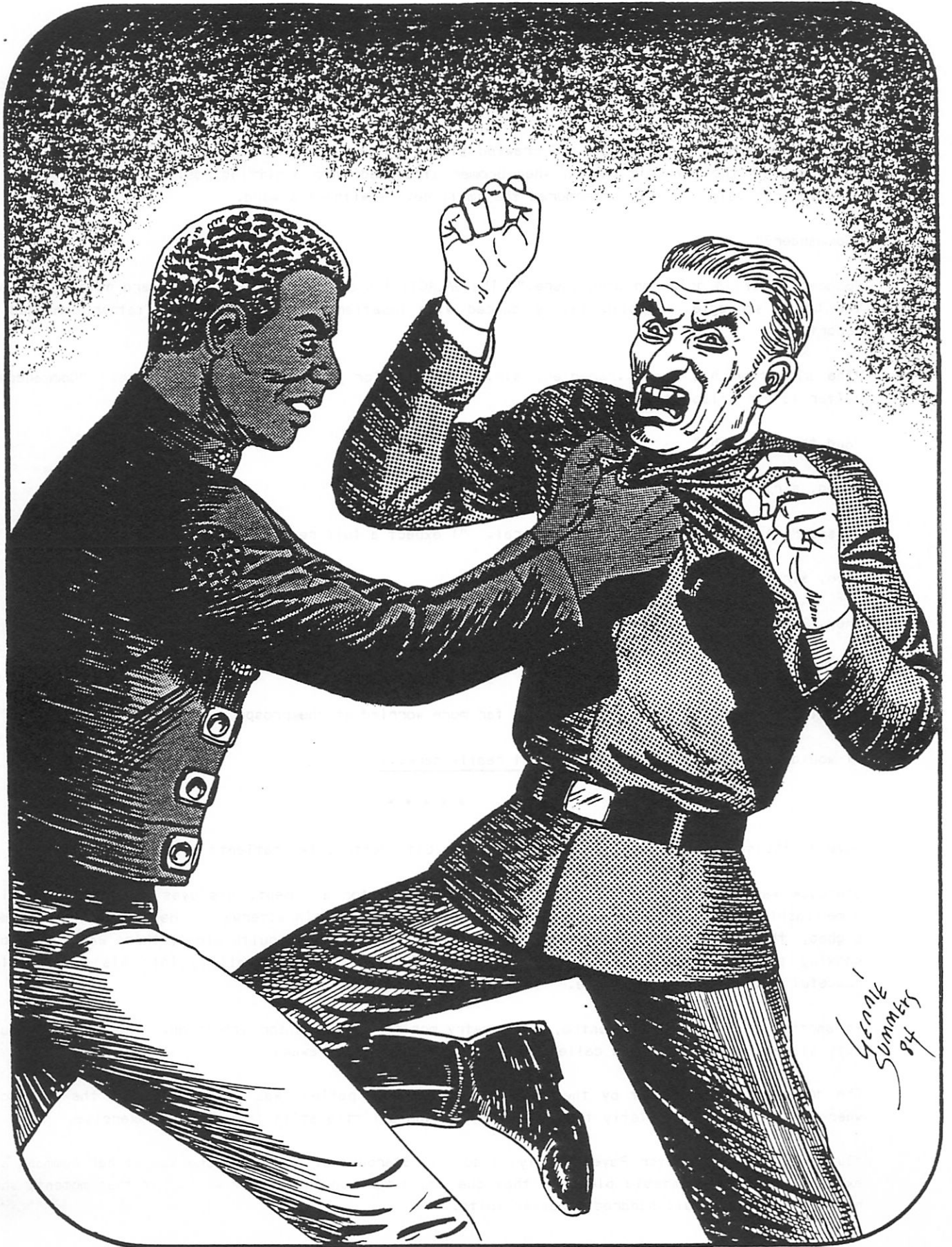
Boomer gasped, and his vision blurred. The telepath surged in his grasp, trying to break free. Panicky at the thought that the man might escape, the Warrior raised his good hand, bringing it down as hard as he could on Jiesser's throat. The telepath choked and gagged, then slowly relaxed.

Boomer lay still on top of his limp opponent, trying to recover his breath. At the same time, Arian rose from his tussle with Leiter, holding a gun on the defeated officer. "Boomer?" he asked, not taking his eyes off Leiter.

"Boomer?" he called louder, manoeuvring his prisoner around so he could see the others.

"He's all right," Bojay assured the marine. "He's down, but he's okay." He sat down painfully, leaning gratefully against the wall of the cave.

"And his target?"



Without getting up again, Bojay reached for the telepath's wrist. "Dead."

"Bojay, I hate to bother you, but would you tell the Commander?" Arian refused to take his eyes off his captive.

"Sure," the other man sighed. He crawled slowly to where the communicator had fallen, and was about to hit the transmit button when Boomer struggled into a sitting position and held out his hand imperatively. Bojay surrendered the small device without a word.

"Commander?"

"Boomer, what is going on down there?" The GALACTICA's bridge personnel had heard nothing during the brief struggle. Apollo fairly danced with impatience and dread as his father demanded a report.

"The situation has been...remedied, sir." The Warrior paused for a deep breath. "Commandant Leiter is our prisoner now."

"And the telepath?"

"Dead, sir."

"I see." Adama's voice was quite neutral. "I expect a full report when you return, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir."

"Hey, Boomer?" Bojay spoke very slowly.

"What?"

"I think you're in trouble." He looked far more worried at the prospect than Boomer did.

"I wouldn't be surprised." But I don't really care...

* * * * *

Several thousand miles away, in the GALACTICA's Life Centre, two patients stirred.

Starbuck was abruptly shocked awake. He lay quietly for a moment, his eyes closed, seeking in some fashion that he could never quite understand, or explain afterward. He found nothing. He sighed, then whispered a heartfelt, "Thank you." Since he was quite alone, there was no way of knowing to whom he thought he was speaking. Then he relaxed, falling into his first truly peaceful sleep since his capture.

In another section of Life Centre, a telemetry monitor squealed for attention. The technician on duty stared in amazement and called Doctor Paye. Athena was awake.

The doctor rushed in, but by the time he arrived, his patient was standing beside the life pod where she had lain so quietly for so long. She was a little stiff from lack of exercise.

"But I feel fine, Doctor Paye. Truly, I do. Is Starbuck all right?" She had at her command an expression of irresistible pleading that she could turn on and off at will. At that moment, she had it going at a full hundred thousand volts.

Paye shook his head helplessly. "I can't understand any of this!" he railed at the ceiling. "They're up; they're down. They're awake; they're asleep. They're alive; they're dead..."

She gasped in horror. "What...? Starbuck...?"

"No, no, relax. He's alive, and doing just fine. All you have to worry about is yourself. Sit down, young lady; I want to give you a physical."

"But I'm fine!" she protested. She hesitated briefly, and the doctor shot her a sharp look.

"I know what happened planetside. Starbuck told us." He forced her into a chair. "He's tried to commit suicide twice. I'm keeping him sedated, which is why you can't see him right now."

Athena's eyes widened in horror. "Tell me," she whispered.

The doctor told her everything he knew, watching her closely all the while.

"And I just slept!" she remarked bitterly.

"Right. You missed all the fun," he said somewhat too casually.

She jumped as if struck, then smiled slowly. "Thank you, doctor. You are adroit."

He sketched her a small bow. "Thank you, lady."

She looked around. The room was totally without interest, a sterile chamber, and it had no chronometer. "What time is it, anyway? For that matter, what day is it?"

He told her, and she blinked in astonishment. "Four days! I want to talk to someone! Doctor, please, let me out -- I want to talk to my father. Please?"

He hesitated, then gave in. "You have until the end of the watch. Then I want you back here. Agreed?"

"Oh, yes! Thank you!" Athena kissed him quickly and ran out before he could react. His smile was warm as he watched her leave. Then he motioned to an orderly, who followed her silently.

It was officially ship's night, and the GALACTICA's corridors were almost deserted. The young Ensign gained her father's quarters without being seen by anyone. The door admitted her. The orderly waited outside; she was unaware of his presence.

Adama sat still, staring in exhaustion at a report on his desk. The yellow lamplight reflecting off his face made him look ancient, and his daughter cried out in protest. "Oh, Father!"

He looked up, and his expression changed instantly to one of unadulterated joy. "Athena!"

She ran into his arms, and hugged him fiercely. In his relief and delight, he almost crushed her. "Oh! Let me breathe!" she gasped, laughing.

"Are you all right, child? Should you be out of bed? How long have you been awake?" he demanded, releasing her.

"Just a bit."

"Should you be out yet? Did Doctor Paye release you?" He was full of parental concern, and Athena basked in it; she seldom saw him as anything but Commander.

"Of course, he released me. There's nothing wrong with me!" She grimaced. "But I have to return at the end of the watch. He wants to do a physical."

"I should imagine!" Adama resumed his seated dignity, and his daughter drew a chair nearer the desk. "You were unconscious for four days, Athena."

Her merriment faded. "I know. And while I slept, Starbuck..." She angrily blinked back tears. "Father? What's going to happen to him?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but just then, the door chimed insistently. "Come," he called, masking his irritation.

A small crowd entered -- Colonels Tigh and Yin, a young marine Lieutenant, Apollo, Boomer, and a limping Bojay. Tigh started to speak, but then they all noticed his companion.

"Athena!" her brother shouted in delight.

She ran to him, and there followed a lot of jostling, hugging, and relieved laughter, from all of which the two marines abstained uncomfortably.

Although he understood the marines' unease, Adama let the loud reunion continue for a while before he broke it up. "Gentlemen," he said, clearing his throat.

They all redirected their attention at once.

"Thank you, gentlemen. May I have your reports now, please?"

Tigh gestured to Yin, and took two steps back. The marine sketched a bow at the other man's courtesy, then turned to Adama. "We have taken the cave, Commander, capturing forty-seven Eastern Alliance soldiers and their commander, Erik Leiter. We see little or no possibility of any other survivors."

"Thank you, Colonel. Lieutenant Boomer?"

Yin stepped backwards and stood at parade rest. Boomer took a deep breath and stepped forward.

"Yes, sir?"

"Lieutenant, please describe your actions of this day, and add your justification for breaking a medical down-check and participating in a battle without authorization."

Boomer gulped, and steeled himself. "This morning at breakfast, sir, Doctor Paye told us that Starbuck was alive. I went to see him, to see for myself. I stayed with him until he regained consciousness."

"When was that?" Adama interrupted.

"I'm unsure as to the exact time, Commander, but it was as I finished lunch. Telemetry could provide the exact time."

"Very well. Continue." He settled back in his chair and steepled his fingers.

"He was...bitter...and...disillusioned...and mad at me," Boomer reported miserably.

"But, why?" Athena demanded, casting her father an apologetic glance.

"Because he was still alive... Because I hadn't killed him..."

Lieutenant Arian, the second marine present, followed the emotions in Boomer's voice and expression raptly.

"He felt the worst about Cassiopeia... He was afraid...she hated him. I was going to explain to her what had happened to him; he told me the whole story." His eyes sought Athena's. "He said it was like repeatedly being lasered between the eyes, all the while knowing there'd be no release into death. And the slavery that results when you break -- and everybody breaks eventually -- is more like rape than rape itself." He closed his eyes and swallowed hard.

Athena nodded slowly, her face carefully blank. "That's exactly how it feels," she murmured. Her expression was frozen, her voice utterly without emotion. "I knew I'd break sooner or later. He just didn't continue long enough."

"Then what happened, Boomer?" Tigh prompted gently.

"I...was just a few steps outside the door when he screamed. I ran back in...and found him trying to get out of the life pod. He was screaming...and crying... I tried to get him to lie still, so he wouldn't hurt himself more. He held on to me, as if he needed...I don't know, an anchor, maybe..." He hazarded a glance at Athena for confirmation.

She nodded. "You have the feeling of being blown around by tremendous winds. You think that if only you had a firm foundation, you could fight. But you never find one." Her voice shook, and her father reached out to take her hand. She smiled at him as Boomer continued.

"Well, he found my laser, and grabbed it...and tried to shoot himself. I took it away from him and threw it across the room where he couldn't reach it." He blinked back tears; his voice was hoarse with them.

"He said Jiesser wanted him to kill you, Commander, and he was perfectly convinced that he would. He begged me for the gun, and I refused. I reminded him that he wasn't drugged this time. The telepath used something on him; he called it 'dominazine,' I think. Anyway, I don't know whether Starbuck believed me or not; I'm not even certain he heard me. He whispered the telepath's name, and begged me to kill him -- slowly. He believed I would, and so did I. Then he fainted, and the doctors threw me out.

"I went up to the bridge and told Apollo everything, including the fact that I believed we'd have to kill Jiesser, or Starbuck would suicide out of terror of being controlled again."

Boomer told the rest of his story baldly, not sparing himself. He didn't disguise his opinion of Leiter's abandoning his men, either. He concluded with a simple statement. "I had the choice of either killing Jiesser or letting him go, so I killed him." He looked Adama in the eye, refusing to back down a centimetre.

"Lieutenant," the Commander said slowly, "are you absolutely certain you did not go to the surface of that planet on a mission to kill?"

Apollo started to protest the question, but his father gestured sharply, and he kept silent. Adama never took his attention from Boomer, who didn't answer for a long moment.

"No, sir," he replied at last. "I went planetside with a strong desire for vengeance for what he did to Starbuck. But..." He hesitated, unsure both of what to say and how to say it. "But after searching dozens of bodies for identification, and seeing so many of our own dead and injured..." He shook his head. "No, sir, by the time we were captured, I'd calmed down enough that I was willing -- even eager -- to rest on your decision. Unfortunately..." He shrugged eloquently. He wasn't going to pretend he cared much that Jiesser was dead.

The Commander studied him intently. "Very well, Lieutenant. Gentlemen, I think this is an appropriate time to announce that Lieutenants Arian, Bojay, and Boomer have all been recommended by their respective commanders for a commendation for their actions today. The recommendations have been approved, and a formal ceremony will be scheduled when the two of you," he nodded at Bojay and Boomer, "are cleared for duty."

Arian and Bojay grinned at one another. Boomer relaxed a little. He bowed ceremonially and retreated. "Thank you, sir."

Abruptly, Adama changed the tone of the gathering. "And now, gentlemen, let's make this debriefing both more thorough and more comfortable. Please, be seated."

The officers all quietly found themselves seats, Athena keeping hers at her father's side.

"All right," the Commander began. "We know Starbuck's story. However, we don't know yours, Athena. What can you remember of the last four days?"

"Remember? Why, nothing." She looked surprised.

"Think very hard," Adama advised.

She sat back in her chair and relaxed, closing her eyes. The men waited silently.

"I remember pain..." she murmured after a moment. "It's awful... That's all there is... It's fading..." Her eyes opened, but she stared blankly, not seeing the others. "Temporary sanctuary...a respite...but...but... Starbuck!" She leapt to her feet. "Starbuck!" Ignoring all of them, she ran for the door.

Bojay stopped her, catching her by the elbows and shaking her. "Wait, Athena! What's wrong?"

She fought him, but he delayed her long enough. By the time she managed to break his hold, the two marines had reached her. When she realized she was caught, she spoke rapidly. "I felt Jiesser die. His control faded away with his death, and I felt it, and knew it was safe to wake up. Starbuck felt it, too. He doesn't think we'll understand. He's killing himself right now!"

Yin shook her once, hard enough to rock her. "How do you know?" he demanded.

"I can see him...hear him... Oh, no, Starbuck, no! No!" Helpless in the grip of the marines, she began to cry hopelessly.

Adama reached for his communicator. "Life Centre. Doctor Paye, please."

"Yes, Commander?" The medical officer sounded harried.

Adama glanced at his hysterical daughter and said, "Please look in on Lieutenant Starbuck, doctor. Leave the comm on."

"Why?"

"An experiment, doctor. Be kind enough to humour me."

They heard the doctor move away. Then the only sound in Commander Adama's quarters was that of his daughter's sobbing. The silence lasted several seemingly endless centons. Then they heard the doctor shout for a nurse.

The Warriors looked at one another in amazement, the Commander somewhat less astonished than the others. Have Athena's experiences made her clairvoyant or precognitive? Or have she and Starbuck become attuned somehow? Or is she imagining it all?

* * * * *

Doctor Paye was more than a little annoyed. Didn't the Commander realize he had work to do? There were fifty-eight injured Warriors in Emergency, and the man wanted him to check on a pilot whose condition hadn't changed in two days.

He opened the door just in time to see Starbuck slump to the floor, blood gushing from his throat. As he ran to the Lieutenant's side, he saw the sherd of broken glass slip from the man's limp hand and fall, bloodied, to the deck.

"Nurse! Nurse!" he shouted. Cherlyn looked in, then ran for the emergency kit on the far wall. The doctor couldn't reach it himself; he had his finger on the slashed carotid.

It took only a few centons to stop the bleeding and seal the cut artery. Then Doctor Paye and an orderly picked Starbuck up off the floor and put him back into the life pod he had so laboriously escaped from. The doctor set about replacing some of the blood his patient had splashed so cavalierly on the deck. Finished, he walked slowly to the intercom.

In the Commander's quarters, seven men and a woman waited anxiously.

"Athena," Adama said gently, "what's happening now?"

As she spoke, she gave no sign of having heard him. "There's so much blood! Starbuck? Starbuck?" She turned wide, frightened eyes to her father. "I can't hear him any more!"

"Commander?" Everyone in the room jumped as Doctor Paye's voice came over the intercom.

"Yes, doctor?"

"I don't know why you wanted me to check on Starbuck, but it's a good thing for him that you did."

"Why? What happened?"

"He somehow got out of his life support pod, found a glass someone had left in there, broke it, and quite efficiently slit his throat."

Athena stared at the intercom in speechless horror. Her father put his arm around her.

"He's not dead. I repeat -- he is not dead," the doctor hastened to add. "If you'd called me a centon sooner, I might have prevented it; if a centon later, I would have been too late. How did you know, Commander?"

"We'll be right there, doctor. I'll explain it to you then."

"Yes, of course, sir."

Adama stood, sighed heavily, and looked at the others, who also rose. "You may all come if you wish..." he began.

Yin bowed slightly. "Thank you, Commander, but I should prepare my final report on the battle, and I must check on my men." The Colonel saluted and left.

"I know why he did this," Athena said quietly as they proceeded down the corridor; it was obvious she meant Starbuck. "He thinks I'm dead, since no one's mentioned me to him since the rescue. He knows Jlesser's dead, but all that means is that he has no corroboration for his story. He knows Boomer believes him, and Apollo, but he doesn't know if Cassiopeia does, or if you do, Father. And he can't face the idea of either of you thinking that he himself committed those horrible crimes. He killed two men; he knows there'll be a tribunal, and he knows he'll be convicted, since in one sense he did commit those murders. He's trying to save us all the pain of convicting him. But," she concluded, wiping unashamedly at her tears, "mostly he can't stand the idea that you and Cassiopeia think he's guilty."

Adama regarded his daughter searchingly for a moment, then turned to his son and to Boomer. "Well?"

"It fits in with Starbuck's statements," Boomer concurred. Apollo nodded.

"Then we must allay his fears."

"Let me talk to Cassiopeia first. Please?" Athena looked almost presentable again, and her father agreed.

* * * * *

"Can I talk to you for a centon?"

Cassiopeia was in bed. The doctors still wouldn't release her, and she resented it. She looked up from her book. "Sure," she said, closing the book on a finger. "What do you want to talk about?"

Athena sat down in the room's single chair. She decided to try shock tactics. "Starbuck just attempted suicide."

One hand tightened involuntarily on the book, but the blonde med tech didn't answer. Athena noticed her reaction, and smiled inwardly. "Do you know why?" she pursued.

"No, of course not. How could I?"

"He did it to apologize for what he did to you."

Cassiopeia flinched. "Apologize! How can anyone apologize for...for..." Her voice broke, and she sobbed.

Athena sat down on the bed and hugged her soothingly. "Cassie, Cassie, listen to me. That wasn't Starbuck at all."

The blonde stiffened and thrust her away. "What do you mean, it wasn't Starbuck? I'd know him anywhere, just as you would, and I know that was Starbuck!"

Athena smiled, unperturbed. "Oh, it was his body, all right. But he wasn't in control of it at the time."

Cassiopeia favoured her with a look of total incomprehension. "What?"

The Ensign launched eagerly into her story. She was particularly careful to emphasize the hopelessness of trying to combat the dominazine, and the horror of what Starbuck had suffered, both physically and mentally.

When she finally finished, Cassiopeia was nearly as pale as the sheets of her bed. "Lords of Kobol!"

"Exactly," Athena agreed softly.

The blonde suddenly looked around the tiny chamber in which she was incarcerated, and began to feel claustrophobic. "I think I'll take a little walk..."

Her companion understood perfectly. "Wait a few centars," she advised. "I think my father's with him now." She stood up to leave.

"Athena?" Her rival sat looking up at her. "Thanks."

The Ensign grinned infectiously. "All competition ceases until you're both healthy again," she decreed.

"Done," Cassiopeia agreed, a wicked sparkle in her eyes. "But you'll have to spend a lot of time down here to equal mine."

"I'll manage," the other woman laughed. "Get well soon, though. I've only got a limited amount of sick leave and furlough time." She waved as she went out the door. "Bye, now."

Cassiopeia thought about the story she'd just heard. It was utterly incredible, and she believed every word of it. Doctor Paye had told her just enough to confuse her; he must've thought she was already aware of what had happened to the captives on the planet. Everything he'd said fit perfectly into the tale Athena had just told.

* * * * *

In a room down the hall, Commander Adama, Colonel Tigh, Captain Apollo, and three assorted Lieutenants tried to talk to a fourth Lieutenant, who wasn't listening. He lay in bed -- his life support pod was needed for a casualty of the morning's battle -- and didn't move or give any other indication that he knew they were there.

Adama finally lost his patience. "Lieutenant!" he barked in a parade-ground voice. His junior officers -- including his Executive Officer -- jumped. Involuntarily, Starbuck turned his head and looked at him.

"That's better. Now, Lieutenant, Colonel Tigh, Captain Apollo, and I constitute a formal military tribunal and have the authority to totally exonerate you of all possible charges arising from the events of the past section, both on the planet's surface and aboard the GALACTICA. We have chosen to do exactly that."

The blond Warrior's eyes widened in amazement at the suppressed fury and frustration evident in the older man's voice. "Thank you, sir," he murmured.

"Now," Adama went on more gently, "your only duty is to regain your strength. Your squadron has become rather...disorganized...in your absence."

Starbuck looked from the Commander to Apollo, then back. "Disorganized, sir?"

The Captain grinned. "Yes. Your luck was withheld too long, my friend. They were in a battle this morning, and more than half of them are on the casualty list. It was a land battle -- they thought they were marines. Nobody died, but twenty-eight of them are here." His vague gesture included the entire Life Centre.

"Luck, he says!" Starbuck snorted. "I used up all my luck."

"Well, you certainly needed it this past section," Boomer said jovially. "I never saw anyone go through so much and come out so well."

For once in his life, the blond Warrior was shocked speechless. He stared at Boomer in total disbelief.

Lieutenant Arian decided it was time to justify his presence. "Lieutenant," he said, stepping forward so Starbuck could see him. "My name's Arian. We've never met before, but the entire ship knows about you and your legendary luck. I spent some time with Boomer and Bojay today, and all I can say is, with friends like these, what do you need luck for?"

At first, Starbuck didn't reply. Then he looked up at the circle of concerned faces around him and said wonderingly, "You know, Arian, I think you just might be right!"

The others smiled with undisguised relief, and Adama gathered them all with a gesture. "Come, now. We must leave the Lieutenant to his rest. Goodbye, Starbuck. I trust you won't be in here long."

"Thank you, sir."

"So long, Starbuck. We'll see you later," Boomer called back to him. He put an arm over Arian's shoulder, and as they went out the door, the patient thought he heard his friend say, "C'mon, pal, I'm going to buy you a drink or six."

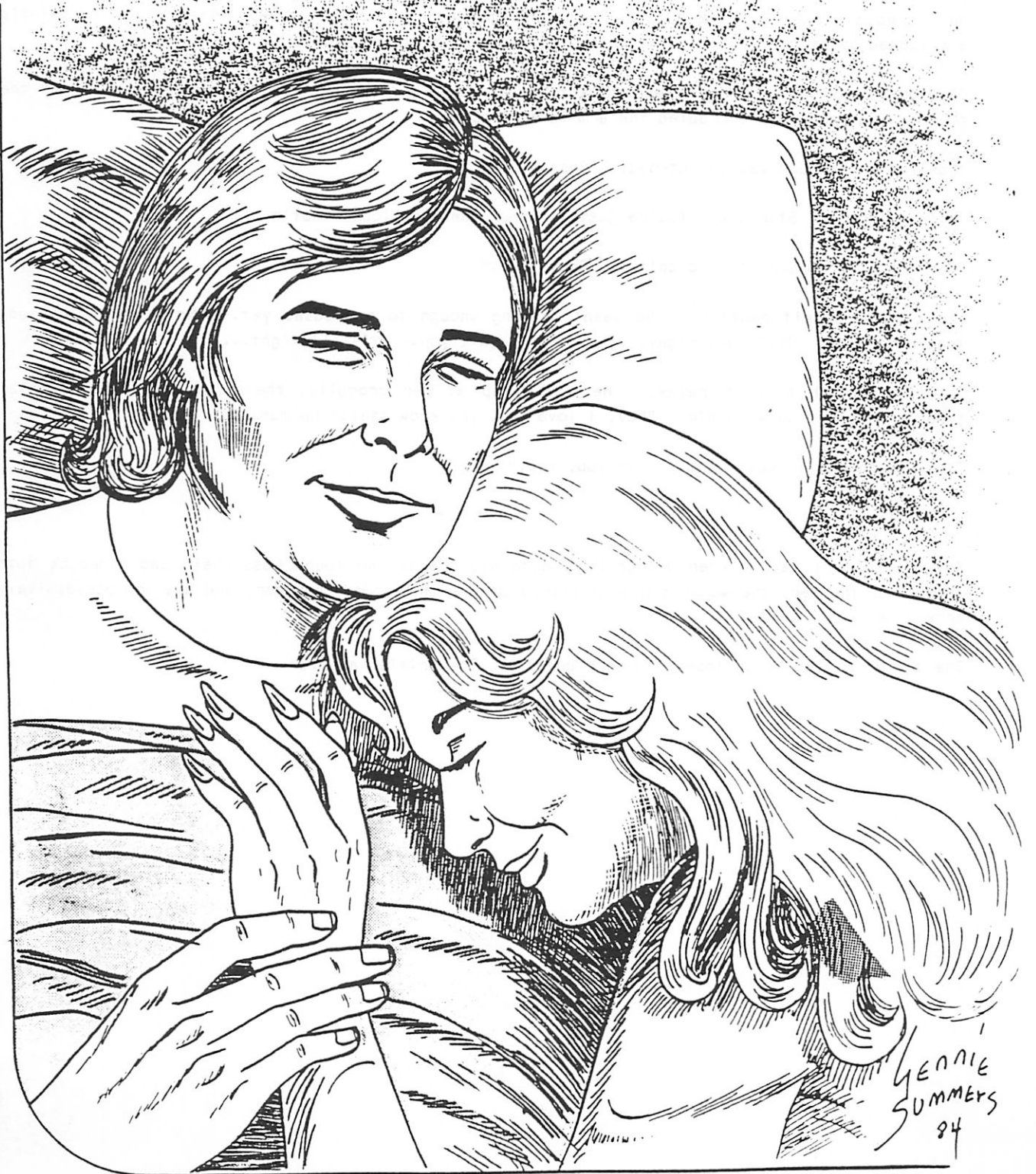
After they were all gone, Starbuck lay still, his mind churning with new thoughts. They believe me! They believe me! The story's so crazy that, sometimes, I don't myself, but they do! Now, there's no one left who doesn't except... His mind shied away from her name. He saw her standing in the doorway, and flinched at the sight.

Cassiopeia saw, and ran to his side, knelt, and kissed him soundly.

For the second time in the same day, Starbuck couldn't speak. He stared at her, hardly believing what was happening. Finally, he managed to sputter, "But...but...Cassie..."

"But nothing," she replied firmly, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. "Athena explained what happened, and I understand."

"Athena! Then she's not...?" His relief was obvious, and for once, Cassiopeia wasn't the least bit jealous.



"No, she's fine. She woke up when Boomer killed Jiesser; she'd been in a coma since you were rescued. And it's a good thing she woke up when she did." She reached a gentle hand to the bandage wrapped around his throat.

He didn't ask what she meant; talking was uncomfortable. But the question was plain in his eyes, and she told him what had happened.

He closed his eyes when she finished, and she thought he'd fallen asleep. Then he smiled faintly and looked up at her. "Yeah," he whispered. "I can hear her, too."

Cassiopeia got up off her knees to sit on the bed, and banged her bandaged elbow against the frame. She gasped, and cradled the arm in her lap.

"Cassie?" Starbuck was frightened. "Cassie?"

"It's all right, Starbuck. You're just stronger than you look, that's all."

"Cassie...I'm so sorry! I didn't... Gods, I..."

She kicked herself mentally. He wasn't strong enough to be teased yet. "Hey," she whispered, leaning closer. "It's all right. I know it wasn't you. It's all right..."

Slowly, he let himself relax. He looked up at her groggily, the strain of the past centar finally catching up with him. "Hey, I love you, you know that?" he mumbled.

"Yes, Starbuck, I know. And I love you, too."

* * * * *

Several centars later, when Doctor Paye made his rounds, he found Cassiopeia and Starbuck both asleep in the bed, the woman's head pillowed on the man's good shoulder, and his arm possessively around her.

The doctor smiled, and closed the door quietly. The crisis was over.

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